DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 126 CS 217 191

AUTHOR	Summer, Caroline
TITLE	Careless Errors: Teaching Expository Writing to Postsecondary Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorder.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	106p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC05 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Attention Deficit Disorders; Computer Uses in Education; Higher Education; *Learning Disabilities; Tutors; *Writing Difficulties; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS	Writing Habits

ABSTRACT

This guide examines the effect of learning disorders on the writing process and gives practical advice to writing teachers, lab tutors, tutors in private practice, learning specialists, and other professionals who regularly meet student writers with learning disorders. The guide also suggests ways writers with learning disorders can write more easily and get better results. Part 1, The Effect of Learning Disorders on the Writing Process, contains: Chapter One (Common Problems of Writers with Learning Disorders); and Self Quiz (Indicators of Possible Learning Disorders in Writing). Part 2, Teaching Writing to Students with Learning Disorders, contains: Chapter Two (General Suggestions for Writing Instructors) which includes the subsections Learning More about Learning Disorders, Fostering a Sense of Safety and Competence, Helping Students Develop a Sense of Purpose and Audience, Making Assignments and Helping Students Meet Deadlines, Encouraging Good Writing Habits, and Teaching Writing in a Systematic Way. Part 2 also includes Chapter Three (Teaching Students to Use Computers for Writing); and Chapter Four (Teaching Students with Learning Disorders about Prewriting, Writing, and Rewriting.) (Contains 56 references.) (RS)

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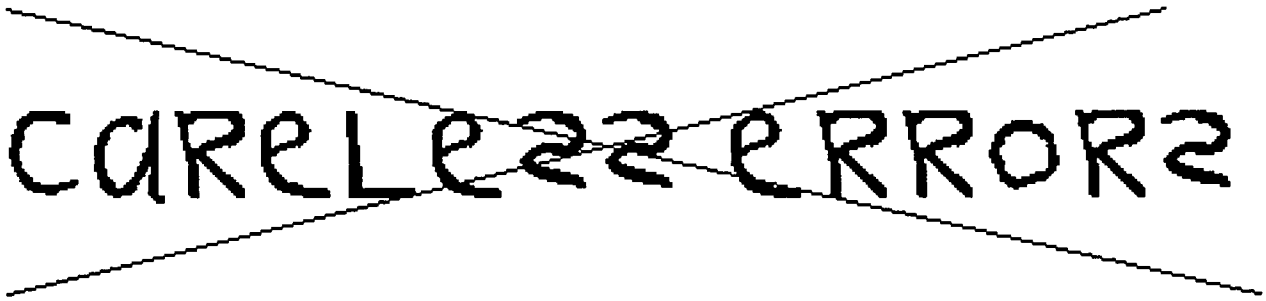

Teaching Expository Writing to Postsecondary Students With Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorder

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I can never sufficiently acknowledge my debt to my colleagues in the Disabled Students' Program at the University of California, Berkeley, who have taught me so much about learning disorders and their effects on postsecondary students. A tip of my authorial hat to Connie Chiba, Helen Beck, and Deirdre Semoff.

Sincere thanks are due also to Stephen Tollefson, director of the UC Berkeley College Writing Program, who took time from his busy schedule to review the manuscript of *Careless Errors* and make invaluable suggestions for revision.

This book would not have been possible if many students with learning disorders had not been willing to share their life stories and their writing with me. I thank them all, and I wish them every kind of success in college and afterwards.

INTRODUCTION: THE DILEMMA OF COLLEGE WRITERS WITH LEARNING DISORDERS

After 25 years, I still remember Minta. With my brand-new Ph.D., I was teaching English at a midwestern university; Minta sat third-row-center in my Introduction to Literature class. We were reading the poems of William Butler Yeats, and Minta had brilliant things to say about them. I recall being afraid that the other students, intimidated by Minta's eloquence, would fall silent and stop contributing to class discussions.

When the first essays were submitted, I could hardly wait to read Minta's--but it wasn't there. She had a good excuse; her grandmother had died. As the weeks lengthened into months, Minta produced more excuses but not a single scrap of writing. Finally I asked her to show up at my office for a motivational chat. She was crying when she arrived. By way of explanation she thrust a few sheets of paper at me: an essay she'd written for a course in American history. I couldn't believe the essay was Minta's. The handwriting looked like a fourth-grader's; letters were crudely formed and lines meandered all over the page. There were innumerable cross-outs and smudged erasures; in places Minta had erased right through the paper, leaving black-rimmed holes. A quick scan of the essay showed that Minta hadn't caught all her mistakes. Innumerable misspell-

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ings leapt up at me and whole words were mysteriously missing, making it difficult to make sense of what she'd written. Unfortunately the instructor's comments were quite readable. At the top of the first page he'd written in big red letters: "***D+.*** Some good ideas, but your careless errors suggest you don't know enough English to buy a tube of toothpaste in a drugstore."

Now, a quarter-century later, I've changed careers. In my present job as a learning disabilities specialist at the University of California, Berkeley, I work with students who, like Minta, have severe difficulty with some parts of the writing process. In my private practice as a psychotherapist, I see clients, successful professionals as well as high school and college students, who are phobic about writing and literally shake with fear when they are compelled to write an essay, a speech, a report--anything!

Darnell, one of my psychotherapy clients, never completed college but makes a good living as a computer graphic artist. Recently his girlfriend persuaded him to enroll in a "Writing Your Autobiography" course at a local community college. Darnell dropped the course without attending a single session. On the first night of class he was so terrified that he couldn't pry his fingers loose from the steering wheel of his car. He later told me, "When I was a teenager a bunch of other kids beat me up really badly. For me walking into a writing class would feel the same as going back to the spot where I got beaten. I just couldn't face it!"

Darnell dropped out of community college five years ago after receiving an "F" in a freshman composition course. Darnell did all the reading for the

course but submitted only two of the seven required essays. Darnell tried to write the essays but became frustrated and angry when his work was repeatedly slowed or halted by a mental fog in which he couldn't find the words he wanted to use, or even remember what he was trying to say. Darnell remembers, " I spent all day writing, and still nothing got finished. A three-page essay that other students did in a few hours could take me three weeks. My grades were okay--but no better than the grades of the students who wrote fast. Afterwhile I didn't even want to *begin* essays; I knew they'd be torture."

About Learning Disorders

The academic lives of Minta and Darnell have been seriously disrupted by problems resulting not from low intelligence or poor motivation, but from neurological dysfunction. Minta was eventually diagnosed with a learning disability (LD), and Darnell was diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Though Minta and Darnell have different diagnoses, it would be accurate to say that they both have *learning disorders,* conditions that impair their ability to perform academic tasks like reading, writing, and doing math. Throughout this book I have used the term "learning disorders" as a generic term for both learning disabilities and AD/HD as they affect the academic experience of postsecondary students.

Diagnosing Learning Disabilities

As I got to know Minta better, I learned that she actually had problems with more than one academic skill. She confessed to me that she not only made innumerable errors in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, but also read

quite slowly. Convinced that she was too stupid to earn a college degree, Minta was on the point of dropping out when she was referred to a learning specialist who convinced her that she had a good mind and belonged in college; her academic problems resulted not from stupidity, but from a learning disability.

In making this diagnosis, the learning specialist had to rule out factors such as "visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or environmental cultural or economic disadvantage" as primary causes of Minta's academic problems (U.S. Department of Education, 1977, p. 65083). In order to be considered learning disabled, Minta had to demonstrate a *severe information-processing deficit* and a *significant aptitude-achievement discrepancy*. Minta eventually learned that her information-processing deficit is in visual processing; though she has good visual acuity (she doesn't need glasses or contact lenses), her brain does not accurately process information taken in through her eyes. The result is slow reading and "careless errors" in the mechanics of writing. In Minta'a testing there was a significant discrepancy between her aptitude (her high Verbal IQ score) and her academic achievement (her slow reading and tendency to make mechanical errors). We'd expect a person of Minta's intelligence to read rapidly and spell accurately, but she is unable to do either. At least in the areas of reading and writing, there is a far greater difference between her potential and her actual performance than most other people show.

Diagnosing AD/HD

Darnell has been diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Darnell's psychiatrist gave him the AD/HD diagnosis because he meets a number of the behavioral criteria set forth in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)*, the essential reference work for mental health professionals. Darnell has never been *hyperactive* or *impulsive;* he does not fidget, talk incessantly, run frantically from one activity to another, interrupt or intrude on other people, find it difficult to wait his turn, or do rash things without considering the results of his actions. Instead Darnell is *inattentive.* In other words, Darnell is easily distracted by sights and sounds in the world around him, and also by his own rapidly-shifting thoughts. He cannot study or work when there is any kind of background noise, and it's hard for him to pay attention during classes or meetings because his thoughts continually drift. Darnell says, "My mind is like a TV set with a weak channel selector. Without my touching the remote, Channel 4 rolls over into Channel 5, which then rolls over into Channel 7. It never stops."

Throughout his life, people have accused Darnell of being a "space case." His mother used to tell him, "You just don't pay attention when I'm talking to you," and now Darnell's girlfriend has the same complaint. Darnell is self-employed and doing well, but he attributes much of his success to his well-organized, detail-oriented partner. Darnell says of himself, "I've got a strange sense of time--or maybe *no* sense of time." There are strict deadlines for most of Darnell's graphic arts assignments; but without his partner's reminders, Darnell

tends to forget the deadlines and drift aimlessly from project to project. He sometimes has trouble getting started on tasks and finishing them on time, he loses notes and preliminary sketches, he forgets to show up for appointments with potential clients, he can't remember who has paid him and who hasn't. Three years running, he forgot to file an income tax return

How Learning Disorders Affect Writing

Both learning disabilities and AD/HD can dramatically affect the way a student writes, causing a variety of problems.

Minta writes very slowly in an effort to avoid "careless errors," editing each sentence as she writes it and then re-editing. She struggles so hard to write correctly that she often forgets what she wants to say. It is difficult for her to write naturally or take pleasure in writing because she constantly envisions an audience of *teachers*, whom she sees as harsh critics with red pens at the ready.

Sometimes Darnell writes slowly and sometimes he doesn't write at all. He writes slowly when he cannot recall the words he wants to use: common words that he has known and used freely since the third grade. He doesn't write at all when he experiences what he calls "the big freeze." He says, "Sometimes when I have to write something really important, I just go blank. My mind feels like my computer when I've opened too many programs at once. It can't handle the overload, so it just freezes. Then I can hardly remember my own name, much less what I wanted to write about." Darnell's completed essays, like Minta's, are studded with errors; instructors complain about his illegible handwriting, his eccentric spelling, and his tendency to omit key words and phrases.

For both Minta and Darnell, the process of writing arouses intense anxiety. Both associate writing with frustration and failure. When Minta and Darnell sit down to write, the process is so difficult that they suspect there is something seriously wrong with their minds. They also have painful memories of past experiences: their classmates' jokes about their rotten spelling, their parents' looks of disappointment, painful sessions with frustrated tutors, big red D's and F's on papers they'd thought were good. At times the pain of these memories, combined with the frustration of the writing process itself, is so great that Minta and Darnell cannot continue to write; they flee from the blank white paper or computer screen. Minta escapes by getting into her car and driving till she is exhausted. Darnell calls friends, arranges to meet them in a café or restaurant, and doesn't come home till after midnight: far too late to begin an essay.

Both Minta and Darnell consulted psychologists about their school problems and both were told that anxiety was the root cause of their difficulties. The psychologists assumed that Minta and Darnell had a hard time writing, and wrote badly, *because they were so anxious.* These psychologists were putting the cart before the horse. Minta and Darnell don't have writing problems because they are anxious, they are anxious because they have writing problems. It is certainly true that anxiety can have very negative effects on writing and other academic skills, but both Minta and Darnell are sure that for them the learning disorders came first.

Unfortunately, the psychological effects of learning disabilities can last a lifetime. Jeffrey H. Gallet, Family Court Judge for the City of New York, was fi-

nally diagnosed with learning disabilities at the age of 35. Despite his success as a writer and jurist, Judge Gallet cannot forget the sufferings of his early years:

> I take special pride in one accomplishment. Having failed English courses in both high school and college, I finally learned how to write. But today, with five books and over thirty articles to my credit, I still suffer from terrible writer's block and an irrational fear that I am about to make a fool of myself every time I sit down to write. The fear and the frustration have left such a lasting mark on me that I can never forget how it was. I can never fully believe it will not be that way again. (Gallet, p. 1)

Questions about Writers with Learning Disorders

Of course people who write poorly are at an enormous disadvantage, not only while they are in school but also in the world of work. We are often judged by what we write; poor writers are very likely to be misunderstood and undervalued. Moreover, since writing is a way of learning, people with poor writing skills are educationally disadvantaged. In his book *Writing to Learn* William Zinsser emphasizes the interconnection of writing and learning:

> Writing organizes and clarifies our thoughts. Writing is how we think our way into a subject and make it our own. Writing enables us to find out what we know--and what we don't know--about whatever we're trying to learn. (Zinsser, 1988, p. 16)

Unfortunately many people with learning disorders are convinced that cannot learn the all-important skill of writing. Over the years hundreds of people with learning disorders, young and old, in and out of school, have told me that they are dreadful writers, incapable of improving no matter how hard they try. In time I began to wonder. Do people with learning disorders write as badly as they think they do? Do some learning disorders make it impossible for people to write well? Can't writing be taught in a way that minimizes the effects of

learning disorders? Seeking the answers to these questions, I embarked on an informal research project.

An Informal Student Survey

The first thing I did was invite my colleagues at UC Berkeley to refer any and all students who had been diagnosed with learning disorders and believed they were poor writers. I also began to spend more time with private practice clients (primarily local high school and community college students) who came to me for help with their writing. I interviewed the students, asking them to describe their learning disorders and their previous experience with writing. Sometimes I watched the students write or wrote with them; at other times we discussed essays they had submitted and gotten back, usually with grades they didn't like.

The results of my informal survey were unexpected. What surprised me was the extent to which many of these students had exaggerated their own faults. Some of the students were poor writers, but by no means all. Except for the normal faults of students at their stage of development and the inevitable errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and general neatness (typical of writers with learning disorders), most of the students produced decent essays. Their writing was not significantly worse than the writing of their non-disabled peers.

What was different was not the end-product, but the writing process of the students with learning disabilities and AD/HD. Actually I was amazed that some of the students could write at all, they suffered from such profound doubts about their competence as writers. They did not believe that they had anything to say or

that anybody would want to read what they wrote. Most wrote slowly, taking two or three times longer to complete each essay than their classmates; they wrote with tremendous effort, little satisfaction, and scant hope of pleasing their teachers, whom they considered the only audience for their work. They never thought of writing as a way of communicating their thoughts and feelings to others; for them writing tasks were a series of hurdles that had to be jumped because the teacher said so.

How did these students come to doubt themselves and their abilities? Why was their writing process so painful and slow? My survey suggested that the students weren't suffering the effects of learning disorders alone, but of learning disorders combined with psychological wounds. In and of themselves, learning disorders create problems for writers. A teacher's reaction to a writer with a learning disorder can make the writer's problems even worse, amplifying self-doubt and confusion. Is the writer's work uneven? He's told that his occasional good essay proves he could write well all the time *if he just tried harder.* (He'd thought he was already trying hard.) Does the writer make "careless errors" in mechanics? She's told that she could fix them *if she were more responsible.* (She proofread her essay five times but still couldn't find all the mistakes.) Does the writer veer from the topic? He's told to *pay attention and stay on-task.* (He only wishes he could!)

Student writers with learning disorders are distressed by the enormous emphasis that teachers place on the mechanics of writing When students make frequent "careless errors," teachers address these errors insistently in their com-

ments, often ignoring content and all stylistic features other than mechanics. Not surprisingly, some writers with learning disorders eventually stop thinking of writing as a way of expressing ideas and come to regard it instead as a kind of "horizontal spelling test" (Lee, p. 23). To avoid the harsh and one-sided criticism they have received in the past, many writers with learning disorders insist on proofreading as they compose. Simultaneously drafting and editing, they seem to spin their wheels furiously without gaining traction. The resulting prose lacks force and focus

Purpose of This Book

I wrote *Careless Errors* as a result of my experience with a number of post-secondary writers who have learning disabilities or AD/HD: at UC Berkeley and other San Francisco Bay Area colleges and universities. The book has two purposes: 1). To examine the effect of learning disorders on the writing process, and 2). To give practical advice to writing teachers, writing lab tutors, tutors in private practice, learning specialists, and other professionals who regularly meet student writers with learning disorders.

In general I ask that professionals adjust their attitudes and approaches to suit the different learning styles of writers with learning disorders; there is no need for radical revision of instructional methods or classroom structure. Experienced writing teachers will find that they are already familiar with some of the information I present, especially techniques for prewriting, writing, and rewriting; I've reviewed this information in order to explain its special importance for writers with learning disorders.

Part I of this book, "The Effect of Learning Disorders on the Writing Process," includes a chapter on "Common Problems of Writers with Learning Disorders," as well as a checklist, "Indicators of Possible Learning Disorders in Writing," which teachers can give to their students for self-analysis. Part II, "Teaching Writing to Students with Learning Disorders," presents a wide variety of suggestions on such topics as learning more about learning disorders, fostering a sense of safety and competence, helping students develop a sense of purpose and audience, making assignments and helping students meet deadlines, encouraging good writing practices, and teaching writing in a systematic way. An entire chapter discusses ways of teaching students to use computers for writing. A concluding chapter gives practical advice on teaching students with learning disorders about the writing process: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. *For easy reference, the book's Table of Contents provides a complete list of all topics addressed.*

What This Book is Not About

This book does not deal with paragraphing, sentence structure, or diction. Nor does it address ways writers with learning disorders can avoid mechanical errors (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, illegible handwriting, and faulty proofreading). In my opinion, people with learning disorders who have had good instruction, have tried hard, and still have not learned to spell, capitalize, punctuate, or handwrite legibly by the time they enter a college or university should abandon the attempt. By relying on computer spellchecks and human proofreaders, these writers will save themselves the immense frustration of trying to do what they are not neurologically equipped to do. Liberated from their

fear of making "careless errors," writers with learning disorders often find that they are able to write more easily and confidently, and with greater pleasure.

About Pronoun Usage

Since I don't want to suggest that all writers with learning disorders are male, I've sometimes talked about "the writer . . . he" and sometimes about "the writer . . . she." I've alternated pronouns by section of the book; in Chapter 1 writers are generally female, in Chapter 2 they're generally male, and so forth. Since teachers also come in two sexes, I've followed a similar procedure with "the teacher . . . he" and "the teacher . . . she."

A Final Word

Careless Errors suggests some ways writers with learning disorders can write more easily and get better results. I am not suggesting that writers with learning disorders work harder; many work too hard already. Instead I am suggesting that they work differently.

I'm aware that *Careless Errors* cannot solve all the problems of beginning writers with learning disorders. Writing isn't easy for anybody, and writers with learning disorders face some daunting challenges: not only because of their disabilities *per se,* but also because they are so often misunderstood and misjudged. This book will have achieved its purpose if it reminds writers with learning disorders, and the professionals who work with them, that in the last analysis *correctness,* faithful adherence to the conventions of written expression, is much less important than the ability to communicate with other human beings in a clear, strong voice.

PART ONE:

THE EFFECT OF LEARNING DISORDERS ON THE WRITING PROCESS

CHAPTER ONE:
COMMON PROBLEMS OF WRITERS WITH LEARNING DISORDERS

Learning disorders are diverse, and so are the problems of students who have them. However, student writers with learning disorders do seem to share some common problems, which I've described below.

Reading through this chapter, experienced writing teachers will surely think, "These problems aren't peculiar to students with learning disorders. *All* beginning writers have them." It is certainly true that many student writers are beset by the problems I describe. Many don't think they are good writers, or despair of pleasing their English teachers, or write slowly, or habitually submit papers late, or can't organize an essay to save their lives, or go blank when they sit down in front of a computer screen.

In a way, student writers with learning disorders are no different from other students; disabled and non-disabled writers have the same problems. However, the problems of writers with learning disorders are more numerous, persistent, and severe, with greater potential for blighting their academic lives. These students don't just doubt their ability to write; they have abandoned all hope. They don't just write slowly; they take three times longer than other students.

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They don't just submit papers late; they are unable to submit them at all. They don't blank out momentarily when they begin writing; they blank out repeatedly or are lost in a fog that won't lift. It can be painful to hear these students describe their experiences with writing, but of course we must listen. Otherwise we'll never be able to help.

A. I don't want to write because I know I'm not good at it.

Even in adulthood many people cannot forget that in the past they had considerable difficulty with writing. As students they found the writing process to be painful and slow, and they often received low grades despite their hard work. It's not surprising that people who have experienced so much pain and so little success often display a strong psychological resistance to writing. All of us, disabled or non-disabled, tend to avoid or postpone tasks that we know will be particularly difficult and tasks that we doubt we can complete successfully.

B. I try hard to please my English teachers, but I never can.

What does it take to please an English teacher? A paper free of "careless errors," of course! Unfortunately most students with learning disorders cannot avoid "careless errors" no matter how hard they try.

It is painful to listen to the stories my clients tell about the ways their writing teachers have punished them for their transgressions. Joey, a 13-year-old student in a San Francisco private school, stopped writing altogether after he spent two weeks working on an essay about the history of the airplane and was forced to watch his teacher rip it up and throw it into the trash. After taking one look at his paper--full of misspellings, crossouts, and erasures--she told him, "If

you don't respect me enough to correct your mistakes and hand in a neat paper, I don't respect you enough to read what you've written."

Erma, now a high school senior, vividly remembers a fifth-grade experience which she believes was "the beginning of the end" for her as a writer. Erma received a grade of "B/F" for her excellent essay about her family's camping trip. Her teacher, the formidable Miss Schmidt, explained that the "B" was for content; she'd enjoyed reading about the camping trip. The "F" was Erma's punishment for her messiness and spelling errors, which Miss Schmidt was sure Erma could have corrected if she'd bothered to spend the time. The "B" and "F" grades averaged out to a "D+." By the time she reached high school, Erma had despaired of pleasing her teachers; she "pre-graded" each of her essays with a "D" or "F" before handing it in.

C. I write because I have to, not because I want to.

Few students with learning disorders think of writing as a way of communicating their thoughts and feelings to other people. They write because somebody is forcing them to write, not because writing gives them an opportunity to express themselves. When compelled to write, they write for their teachers, the people who will grade their essays, not for a general audience of people who will be entertained, moved, or influenced by their words.

Of course many beginning writers, with and without learning disorders, write only because they are required to do so; and many regard the teacher, the person who will assign a grade to their work, as their only audience. These attitudes, however, are especially prevalent among writers with learning disorders.

Too often teachers focus on the faults of writers with learning disorders (their mechanical errors, their chaotic organization) and pay scant attention to the thoughts and feelings the writers are trying to express. Not surprisingly, the writers eventually forget that they are trying to say something; they begin focusing, as their teachers do, on their own stylistic limitations.

After years of criticism, many writers with learning disorders are no longer conscious of having anything to say, or have lost confidence in their ability to express themselves with clarity and force. Because they cannot (or dare not) please themselves by writing their own truth, they try very hard to write the teacher's truth. If they can find out what she wants and then provide it, perhaps they will be safe from criticism.

I have noticed that college writers with learning disorders often obsess about the teacher's likes and dislikes; they scurry around like participants in a scavenger hunt, trying to unearth all possible clues to "what the teacher wants." In their hearts, however, they know that they are bound to lose the game, as they have lost so many times before. Whatever they write is unwanted and unwelcomed, like a fresh-killed mouse on a cat-owner's pillow. Still, these writers forbid themselves to give up. They've learned to be persistent, having been told all their lives, "Try a little harder! You could do so well if you'd just *try!*"

D. My writing is sometimes good, sometimes bad.

In *Writing Down the Bones* (1986), Natalie Goldberg reminds the beginning writer that "[writing] is your friend. It will never desert you, though you may desert it many times" (p. 110). Writers with learning disorders feel that

writing *does* occasionally desert them; sometimes they find, to their dismay, that writing skills they thought they could rely on, have suddenly vanished.

Learning disorders are inconsistent; they don't affect people 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. On a day when the writer's learning disorder isn't plaguing her, all the cognitive skills needed for writing may mesh smoothly so she is able to turn out a fine piece of prose with minimal effort. On another day, one cognitive skill or another may fail, forcing her to work harder, write more slowly, and produce inferior work.

The student's occasional "perfect essay" may prompt the teacher to exclaim, "You see! I *knew* you could do it if you really tried!". The teacher is now convinced that the student is capable of writing a series of perfect essays; these essays probably won't be written, though, because the student's writing ability fades in and out like a weak radio signal.

E. Often I don't understand what I'm being asked to do.

Learning disorders may lead to a misunderstanding of spoken or written instructions, so the writer gets the wrong impression about what she is being asked to do. Writers with may be mentally drifting or "out to lunch" when an assignment is made, so they have no idea that they are supposed to do anything at all.

Of course results of this confusion can be painful. Submitting no paper at all is disastrous. A good paper on the wrong topic is likely to receive a poor grade. If an instructor tells a student to write a ten-page paper and she understands that

she's supposed to write five pages, she's headed for trouble. If she mistakes the due-date or *compares* when she's supposed to *contrast*, she's in trouble again.

F. I find it hard to get started on a writing project or meet deadlines.

Given a writing assignment by her instructor, a student with a learning disorder may promise faithfully to have it finished by a certain date--but then find, to her horror, that she cannot even take the first step. She may delay until the very last second and end up not having enough time to do a good job, or she may not complete the assignment at all. Either way she reproaches herself for what she calls her "procrastination."

I wouldn't say that writers with learning disorders are "procrastinating" when they find themselves unable to get started on a writing project. The word "procrastination" suggests moral turpitude: a poor attitude, a failure of the will. Most writers with learning disorders, well-motivated and strong-willed, try hard to begin work on time but for a variety of reasons cannot get into gear. Some are slow starters because they have never received good writing instruction and don't know how to proceed. Others are slow starters because they experience psychological resistance to beginning a task which has always been difficult and unrewarding for them.

Still others are slow starters because of their learning disorders *per se*. There are learning disorders, especially , that cause people to have difficulty mobilizing to begin any new project; for these people, setting goals and systematically pursuing them is challenging. Hampered by a poor sense of time, a student

with may delay beginning a small, manageable writing task because she fears that it will take forever to complete. Another student with may wait to begin a 20-page essay until the night before it is due because she is convinced that one night will give her plenty of time to finish.

Writers with may begin a project on time but never finish because they keep drifting from one thought to the other, or from one uncompleted activity to the next. Some researchers and clinicians say that people with , far from having "attention deficits," are actually, in a sense, overly attentive. In *Driven to Distraction* (1994), Hallowell and Ratey describe as "the ability to concentrate on everything " (p. 282). Many people with seem to notice every feature of the world around them, and many find it impossible to ignore a single one of the many thoughts that go skateboarding through their minds. Often people with *want to notice less,* but have great difficulty in excluding anything from their awareness; they can't seem to push a single sense-impression or tag-end of thought to the periphery of consciousness. It's no wonder that they often describe themselves as feeling "bombarded," "besieged," or "overwhelmed."

The "Procrastinating" Writer: Edna's Story

How might this heightened awareness, this inability to exclude random sense-impressions and thoughts, affect a writer with ? Consider Edna's story. On Friday her instructor for a course in marketing assigned a three-page essay to be submitted by the following Monday. Edna planned to write a proposal for an advertising campaign urging neighborhoods to recycle. With the deadline looming, Edna knew she had no time to waste. She immediately began making notes; but

when she began thinking about neighborhood recycling, she drifted into thoughts of the neighborhood in which she grew up, then thoughts about the house she lived in when she was ten, then thoughts about her parents. Her original topic, neighborhood recycling, receded in her mind until it disappeared altogether, like a billboard briefly glimpsed during a fast trip down the freeway.

On Sunday night Edna locked herself into her dormitory room and planted herself in front of her computer, grimly warning herself, "You have to write this paper now--or else!" She couldn't concentrate, though, because she was distracted by the murmur of conversation down the hall, the low hum of the janitor's vacuum, the buzzing of her fluorescent study lamp. The bright-colored splashes of photos and printed notices on the bulletin board caught her eyes and she couldn't make herself look away.

Making a strong effort to wrench her consciousness away from these distracting sounds and sights, Edna at last began work on her paper. She was really rolling when a knock on her door interrupted her; a friend was having a birthday party and Edna was invited to drop by for a slice of cake. Two hours later she was on her way back to her room when she noticed that the plants in the hall were shriveling for lack of water and needed trimming. Fetching a watering can and a pair of scissors, Edna began giving the plants first aid. She completely forgot about her writing task until a clock struck, reminding her--to her horror--that it was past midnight. Her heart sank as she realized that the only project she had completed was a horticultural one!

G. I get confused when I have to juggle many different pieces of paper.

People with learning disorders may have trouble organizing their personal possessions, including their papers. Their binders, backpacks, briefcases, or file cabinets may be stuffed full of miscellaneous scraps of paper in no particular order. These writers may temporarily or permanently mislay important bits of paper, including assignments, their notecards or bibliography cards, early drafts of their writing, or even completed final drafts that are ready for submission. At all stages of the writing process, the inability to find necessary bits of paper may confuse and dishearten the writer. During the organizational stage the writer may be driven to despair by the sight of hundreds of notecards. She can't imagine classifying them and then stacking them into neat little piles, any more than she can imagine classifying and stacking the fallen leaves that litter her front yard each autumn.

H. The physical process of handwriting is painful for me.

Many people with learning disorders grip their pencils or pens awkwardly, exerting too much or too little pressure on the paper as they write. Not surprisingly, their hands tire or cramp painfully and their penmanship is poor.

Though printing is generally more time-consuming than writing in "cursive" or "script," many people with learning disorders insist on printing everything: partially to make their handwriting more legible and partially to make the writing process simpler for themselves. Some learning disorders cause writers to have difficulty recalling and automatically reproducing the shapes of different

letters of the alphabet; for example, ***b*** may be confused with ***d*** or ***p***. For people with learning disorders, this alphabetic confusion can make it difficult to print and even more difficult to write cursive, in which letters seem to lose their definition and melt into one another, the shape of each letter partially determined by the letters that precede and follow it.

I. I can't write an organized essay.

Writers with learning disorders, especially , may have severe organizational difficulties at all stages of the writing process: prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

While gathering information, a writer jots down miscellaneous facts from various sources, her own stray thoughts and perceptions, other people's observations, and quotations from books and articles. When she is ready to begin drafting, the writer must survey these bits of information and ask herself, "What does all this add up to?" In order to arrive at a thesis for the essay, the writer must progress from details to generalizations, or from the specific to the abstract. Once she has arrived at a main idea, she must be able to break it down logically into sub-divisions, devoting a section of her essay to each part.

In other words, the writer of an organized essay must be able to ***synthesize*** (combine or summarize ideas) and ***analyze*** (break ideas down into their component parts). These skills are challenging for all of us, but may be especially so for writers with learning disorders. Synthesis is hard for people with , who often feel awash in a sea of details; how are they supposed to pour all that water into just one bottle? Analysis is hard for people with sequencing deficits, who can't easily

perceive temporal or causal relationships ("first A, then B, and then C"--and the result is D").

Even if she can decide exactly what she wants to say and write a clear, specific thesis statement, a writer with a learning disorder may have trouble remembering it as she writes. She may veer off into tangents, ending up so far afield that she seems to be embarking on an entirely new thesis.

When it's time for revision, writers with and other learning disorders are sometimes told, "You've got everything but the kitchen sink in this essay. It rambles all over the place. Tighten it up! Cut out all the material that's irrelevant!" This kind of advice can bewilder a person with , who may be fascinated by "irrelevant" details and totally unmoved by details that others (including her teachers) consider highly significant. How does the writer decide which material in her essay should be cut because it is "irrelevant?" To her everything in her essay appears to be integrally related to everything else. Nothing appears irrelevant.

J. I write slowly because I'm trying hard to avoid "careless errors."

Many people with learning disorders are prone to mistakes in the mechanics of writing: spelling, punctuation, capitalization, handwriting, and general neatness.

No matter how hard these writers work on mechanics, errors persist. One word may be spelled four different ways in a two-page essay; the word *choice* may appear also as *chioce* and *choyce* or *chice*. Beginning, middle, or ending portions of words may seem to have mysteriously vanished; for example, "They walked

downtown," may be transmuted into "The walk down." (If asked to read their work aloud, writers with learning disorders may read as if the missing letters or syllables were actually present.) A word the writer means to use may be accidentally replaced by another that appears somewhat similar: for example, "express" may appear instead of "expense." Errors in punctuation and capitalization may also abound. Attempts to correct errors in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization may result in multiple erasures that combine with chicken-scratch penmanship and uneven, awkwardly-slanted lines to convey an impression of general messiness.

Rivers of red ink are spilled onto the papers of students with learning disorders. Too often elementary school writers with learning disorders are harshly criticized, and sometimes publicly shamed, for errors they can't help making. They are given the impression that neatness, together with accuracy of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, are the cardinal virtues for writers. Students are often given two grades (B+/D-), one for content and one for mechanics. Double-graded essays may represent the teacher's attempt to give students credit for their good ideas despite their poor grasp of the mechanics of writing. Unfortunately the double grade gives some students the mistaken impression that ideas and mechanics are equally important.

Because they have so often been told, "Thou shalt avoid mechanical errors," and because they have so often been made to suffer for their sins, writers with learning disorders try very, very hard to avoid "careless errors." Ever alert

for the smallest transgression, they proofread as they go. No wonder they write slowly!

K. Sometimes I go completely blank.

Occasionally people with learning disorders (especially) experience a mental fog that makes thinking difficult. This dysfunction can very seriously affect the writing process. My clients have various ways of describing the mental fog, including "going blank," "freezing up," "mental paralysis," "mental gridlock," and "power outage of the brain."

It's difficult to explain just what is happening for writers with a learning disorders when the fog rolls in. Most likely they are experiencing a dysfunction in *working memory*, which authority Russell Barkley defines as "holding information in the mind while working on a task, even if the original stimulus that provided the information is gone" (Barkley, 1998, p. 69).

As Melvin D. Levine points out in *Developmental Variation and Learning Disorders* , writing requires a great deal of working memory:

> To write effectively, students must remember and think at the same time. They have to ensure that the multiple components of writing cohere. While thinking of the proper punctuation or capitalization for a sentence, students must sustain the narrative flow. Those who experience difficulty with active working memory during writing may keep forgetting what they intended to record. This results in disorganization, in ideational chaos. (Levine, 1987, p. 319)

Unfortunately working memory is impaired for many people with (Barkley, 1998, p. 69), who may arrive at a state of overload and confusion more quickly than their non-disabled peers.

Writers with learning disorders may also have trouble with another aspect of memory: retrieving words from memory-storage. Before she writes a single sentence to express one of her ideas, the writer must look into her memory to find the right words. A writer with a learning disorder may have an excellent vocabulary which she uses easily and effectively in conversation; while writing, however, she may suddenly come to a screeching halt because she is unable to find the words she needs. They're "on the tip of her tongue" but they are not currently available. The writer's mind goes blank. With this sudden stoppage in the flow of language, the words that have already been written may seem to pile into one another, like escalator passengers when the electricity is abruptly switched off. With her words and thoughts in tangled heaps, the writer may have to begin the sentence (or the paragraph or the essay) over again.

L. I keep starting over.

There are many reasons why a piece she has written may look subtly or blatantly ***wrong*** to a person with a learning disorder, prompting her to throw it into the trashcan and begin all over again.

She may be aware that she has committed many crimes against the laws of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization; although she can't find and correct her "careless errors," she knows they're there. Because of poor handwriting, crossed-out words, and smudged erasures, her paper may have an unsavory, uninviting look, like a chimney-sweep after a hard day's work. How can she accept such a creature as her own child?

As she reads over her completed work, the writer recalls a hundred different arguments she could have made (but didn't), a hundred ways she could have developed her thesis (but didn't). Why did she make the choices she did? She no longer remembers. Maybe she should return to her original point of departure and start down a new road: try something completely different! As she reads, the writer's attention may shift from the ideas she expressed in the piece to others which have just popped into her head. Maybe she should rewrite to incorporate these exciting new ideas!

Somehow the piece seems alien, *not hers.* The words are awkward, not ones she would normally use. The thoughts aren't hers either. She tried so hard to please the instructor who gave her the assignment that the piece seems to be his: a graceless step-child, not the darling of her heart.

INDICATORS OF POSSIBLE LEARNING DISORDERS IN WRITING

DIRECTIONS

Review the statements below and check those that are true for you. One or two checks don't prove that you have a learning disorder, but if you've checked a number of statements you should consider being assessed to see if you may have a learning disorder that is affecting your writing.

To find a professional who will give you a thorough assessment and make sure you understand the results, contact the disabled students' office of your local community college, four-year college, or university. If you are a student there, they may be able to assess you themselves; if not they can refer you to a good assessment professional in your community. Give the assessment professional a copy of this questionnaire.

- ☐ My spoken expression is far superior to my written expression. I speak clearly and confidently but I don't write that way.
- ☐ I lack confidence in my ability to write, or I actually fear writing.
- ☐ Sometimes I experience a panic attack when I sit down to write.
- ☐ I often misinterpret writing assignments, producing work that doesn't meet the basic requirements of the task. (For example, I may write on the wrong topic, produce the wrong number of pages, or use the wrong format.)
- ☐ I am overly-concerned about the reaction of the person(s) who will read my writing.
- ☐ I rarely think of writing as a way of communicating what I think and feel.

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☐ When given a writing assignment, I'm confused about how to proceed: what to do first, second, third, and so forth.

☐ I find it hard to get started on a writing project or to submit writing assignments on time.

☐ Sometimes I don't turn in writing assignments at all.

☐ When I write, I accumulate a large number of pieces of paper and I find it very difficult to keep track of them.

☐ I can gather information and I have interesting ideas, but I find it very difficult to write something that is *organized.*

☐ When I have gathered many pieces of information to use in a piece of writing, I feel so overwhelmed by the mass of detail that I can't even begin. I can't get from details to generalizations.

☐ I have a good vocabulary but often I can't think of the "right word" to use in a piece of writing.

☐ Sometimes when I sit down to write, I just "go blank" and can't do anything at all.

☐ I'm perfectionistic. I keep discarding the current piece of writing in order to start over and "do it better."

☐ My successive revisions of a piece of writing are so different from each other that they are scarcely recognizable as versions of the same piece.

☐ My handwriting is illegible or hard-to-read, with letters malformed, words poorly-spaced, and lines not parallel to one another. My handwriting looks as if I'm younger than I really am.

☐ I typically choose to print rather than write "script" or "cursive."

☐ I make numerous small mechanical errors: spelling, punctuation, capitalization, handwriting, proofing. No matter how hard I try, I can't find and correct all the mistakes.

☐ I write slowly, constantly editing and re-editing, in an attempt to avoid making errors.

☐ My writing is full of erasures and crossed-out words, giving evidence of painful rewriting.

PART TWO:

TEACHING WRITING TO STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISORDERS

CHAPTER TWO:
GENERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING INSTRUCTORS

During my years as a college English instructor, I graded thousands of student essays. I generally tried to be kind and helpful, but too often I was neither. After many hours of grading I became irritable; awkward sentences and incessant misspellings rubbed my nerves raw. I wondered why students didn't care enough about the assignment to proofread their work. Occasionally I descended to a snippy comment about "careless errors."

Now that I am a learning specialist, I realize that many student writers--at least those with learning disorders--would do better if they could. If I were teaching English today, I'd have more compassion for students with learning disorders, who struggle so hard for such meager rewards.

In their book *The Elements of Teaching* (1997), James M. Banner, Jr., and Harold C. Cannon define compassion as "a powerful reaction to the awareness of the difficulties that afflict others" (p. 83). To effectively guide writers with learning disorders, one must begin with compassion. Teachers who resist this notion--fearing, perhaps, that compassion and high academic standards are mutually exclusive--should refer to Banner and Cannon:

> Those who experience difficulty in accepting the place of compassion in the classroom, who resist the idea of sympathetic emotions,

> or who prefer their working lives to be exclusively intellectual should avoid teaching altogether and probably consider devoting themselves to less demanding occupations, such as politics or crime. (p. 89)

This chapter's general suggestions for writing instructors are grouped into the following categories: 1). Learning more about learning disorders; 2). Fostering a sense of safety and competence; 3). Helping students develop a sense of purpose and audience; 4). Making assignments and helping students meet deadlines; 5). Encouraging good writing habits; and 6). Teaching writing in a systematic way.

Learning More About Learning Disorders

• **Welcome students with learning disorders to your course and invite them to share information about their disabilities in a private session with you.** You can invite the confidence of students with learning and other disabilities by putting a paragraph into your course syllabus welcoming them and inviting them to give you information they think you'll require in order to teach them effectively. Following is a sample paragraph from *Teaching Students with Disabilities,* a publication of the Disabled Students' Program at the University of California, Berkeley:

> If you need disability-related accommodations in this class, if you have emergency medical information you wish to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please see me immediately. Please see me privately after class or in my office. (Summer, 1999)

• **Honor requests for "academic adjustments."** Students may arrive at your office with official requests for "academic adjustments" (sometimes called

"accommodations") from the disabled students' office. Academic adjustments are modifications in instructional methods which a disability specialist has determined to be necessary in order to assure the student's full access to your course. Academic adjustments are not intended to give an unfair advantage to students with disabilities, but to remove barriers that prevent them from learning or demonstrating what they have learned. Typical academic adjustments for a student with a learning disorder are extended time for exams, a distraction-free exam site, extended deadlines for essays, and no grade penalty for mechanical errors on *in-class* writing assignments. (For out-of-class writing assignments, students can use computer spell-check and human proofreaders.)

• **Seek additional information from the disabled students' office.** Questions about the academic adjustments that have been requested for students can be discussed with the students themselves or with their disability specialists at the disabled students' office. This office can give you information about learning disorders in general; with a student's consent, you and his disability specialist can discuss specific aspects of the student's learning disorder as they affect writing. The specialist may be able to make useful suggestions about pedagogy.

• **Interview students to obtain information about the effect of their learning disorders on the writing process.** In private, one-to-one discussions (in your office, not the classroom), give students a chance to talk about their learning disorders, their previous experiences with writing, and the way they typically approach writing tasks.

Below is a list of questions about the writing process. As you discuss these questions with students, seek information about their strengths and weaknesses. Are there steps in the writing process that they do particularly well because they have found creative ways of getting over, under, or around the barriers placed in their paths by their learning disorders? Are there points at which the students get stuck or have unusual difficulty? You might ask the students to complete the self-quiz, "Indicators of Possible Learning Disorders in Writing" (above). Later you can meet with the students to discuss any insights resulting from the quiz

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDENT'S WRITING PROCESS

- When the instructor gave you the assignment, did you analyze it? How did you make sure you understood what you were supposed to do?
- How did you decide what kind of thinking or research you needed to do?
- Did you write any kind of plan or schedule for this writing project?
- How did you take notes and keep track of which books and articles you read?
- Did you use a computer at any point in the writing process? If so, how?
- At what point did you get clear about what you wanted to say in this essay? What helped you get clear?
- How did you organize the essay? Did you write an outline, or did you use some other organizational method? Did this method work well for you?

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- ❖ **When you planned and wrote the essay, what reader did you have in mind? Your teacher? Somebody else?**
- ❖ **Did you design your essay to affect your reader in a certain way? How did you decide what design to use?**
- ❖ **What was it like when you finally sat down to write your first draft?**
- ❖ **Did you write more than one draft? If so, how did you decide what changes to make when you rewrote?**

• **Tactfully refer students with possible learning disorders for diagnostic assessment.** If you suspect that a student writer has a learning disorder, you'll be doing him a favor if you refer him for assessment. But how do you broach this difficult subject? It's best to begin with a general statement that will give the student an opportunity to tell you about his learning disorder if he is already aware that he has one. For example, you might say, "Harold, I know you pretty well now, since we've been working together all semester. I can see that you're intelligent and hard-working. I can also see that you're not getting the results you want in this class. Do you have any ideas about what's getting in your way?"

If Harold discloses that he has a learning disorder, you can initiate a discussion about how it affects his writing process. If Harold is clueless about the causes of his writing problems, you can continue, "Some of the things you've told me about your writing are things that I've heard students with learning disorders say. Maybe you'd like to take a look at this sheet, *Indicators of Possible*

Learning Disorders in Writing. If a number of the statements seem true for you, you might want to talk with a counselor at the disabled students' office about getting an assessment. The assessment might give us information that we can use to work on your writing."

Fostering a Sense of Safety and Competence

• **Understand that early shame experiences can damage the self-esteem of students with learning disorders.** I rarely meet a student with a learning disorder who doesn't suspect that he's stupid or lazy. It's not surprising that even the most intelligent and hard-working students with learning disorders doubt themselves. They remember being told, "This work is so poor--it makes me wonder about you!" and "You could do better if you really tried!"

Most students with learning disorders tell horror stories about being humiliated by teachers or laughed at by classmates for mistakes they couldn't avoid. Even when teachers and classmates were kind, the students felt embarrassed because they needed "special help." Many learned to hate the word *special.* Some felt stigmatized when they were forced to attend *special day classes* with students who were mildly mentally retarded; others felt embarrassed when they were pulled out of their regular classes and sent to the resource specialist's room for *special instruction.*

Students with learning disorders may need to discuss early shame experiences with a psychotherapist who understands that a child's learning disorders--together with critical comments leveled at him by parents, siblings, teachers,

classmates, and other important people in his life--can cause the child to grow up with emotional wounds just as painful as the wounds caused by parental alcoholism or abuse.

It isn't easy to find psychotherapists who are knowledgeable about the emotional effects of learning disorders (Summer, 1994, p. 38). Counselors in disabled student programs of local community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities may be able to provide the names of qualified psychotherapists in the area.

- **Let students know that you have some understanding of the problems learning disorders can cause and that you wish to help.** If possible, see students privately on several occasions. Tell them you know something about learning disorders and would like to know more. Encourage them to discuss the effect of their learning disorders on their writing, assuring them that you will keep their confidence and will not condemn them as lazy, stupid, or irresponsible if their disabilities cause them to make mistakes. During these one-to-one sessions, acknowledge the students' hard work, discuss their strengths as well as their limitations, and emphasize their progress in solving certain problems that have challenged them in the past. (For example, you might point out that a student's essays are now much easier to read because he's writing better paragraph-to-paragraph transitions.)

- **Encourage students to maintain contact with you.** For example, invite them to clarify assignments or ask research-oriented questions by email. Meet

with them to draft timetables for prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Make it possible for them to review early drafts of their essays with you. After first drafts are returned, meet with students again to discuss plans for rewriting.

• **Respond to written work carefully.** Be especially careful in responding to the written work of students who have learning disorders, since they are usually even more grade-sensitive than their non-disabled peers.

Grades are supposed to give students information about how well they are doing, but few students with learning disorders trust this information. In the past they haven't received grades that seemed to them to reflect their effort or the intrinsic merit of their writing. For this reason it's important that the instructor explain why the student has received a particular grade. Beginning with a statement about what she perceives to be the student's purpose in writing this essay, the instructor can make specific comments about writing problems the writer has tackled and how well he has done with them, as well as the student's general progress since the beginning of the term.

• **Avoid writing too much on students' papers.** When responding to the writing of students with learning disorders, instructors should resist the urge to scribble too much on their papers. Writers with learning disorders suffer acutely when returned papers are so covered with red markings that the original text is hardly visible. This over-zealous editing is not only painful, it is also pointless. Circling all mechanical errors is not helpful when a writer's errors result from

neurological dysfunction rather than ignorance or carelessness, and the circlings won't help the writer make necessary corrections.

Numerous instructor comments may also be hard to read. Many students with writing problems also have reading problems. Those who have trouble deciphering printed text are bound to have even more trouble deciphering the comments that their instructors scrawl in the margins or jam between the lines of their essays.

General critical comments are most readable when clearly written at the end of the essay, or (even better) typed on a separate sheet of paper. In writing comments, instructors should avoid abbreviations; for example, students with memory problems may not remember that "dm" means "dangling modifier."

- **Instead of complaining about mechanical errors, help students get rid of them.** If you found it hard to read a student's essay because of his frequent mechanical errors, say as much (once) in your general comments at the end of the essay. Suggest that the student use computer spellcheck and a human proofreader, but don't tell him to look up words in the dictionary; he may spell so poorly that he can't tell where in the dictionary to begin looking.

You'll need to assist students with learning disorders in finding competent proofreaders, since students who are constitutionally unable to spell, punctuate, and capitalize are in a poor position to evaluate the skills of people who claim to be fine proofreaders. To assist my students, I've prepared a three-page essay which is rife with mechanical and grammatical errors of all kinds. My stu-

dents can give this essay to a potential proofreader and return it to me with the proofreader's corrections. I can then advise the students about whether this proofreader is likely to be helpful.

- **Create peer writing groups that are safe and effective for students with learning disorders.** Though peer writing groups can be enormously helpful to students with learning disorders, most don't want to join them. Haunted by their fear of ridicule, writers with learning disorders may strenuously resist all invitations to join peer writing groups. One student asks himself, "What'll happen when everybody sees my sloppy papers full of spelling mistakes? Won't they laugh?" Another wonders, "Won't the other people in the group think I'm an idiot when I try to read my own essay aloud and can't pronounce the words?" Still another worries, "What'll happen if I can't stop my mind from wandering while I'm listening to somebody read her essay? How can I say something about the essay when I was on Mars for half of it?"

Students with learning disorders can profit greatly from participation in peer writing groups, but the conditions of their participation should be carefully considered ahead of time. Students should never be compelled to disclose the existence of their learning disorders to other members of their groups. Without giving class members confidential information about students, the instructor can set up peer groups with rules and regulations that help students feel safe and minimize the effects of disability. For example, if a student has which causes him to mentally drift, causing him to have difficulty attending to essays which are be-

ing read aloud, the instructor can arrange to have all group members receive copies of essays before class. (Copies can be picked up at the instructor's office, or forwarded to group members by email.) If a student has word-retrieval difficulties that make it hard for him to speak spontaneously during group sessions, all group members can be given the option of *writing* reactions to an essay and emailing them to the writer.

Instructors should confer with their students who have learning disorders about what constitutes a safe and effective peer writing group; many students have given much thought to the topic and can make intelligent suggestions which will enhance the writing group experience for disabled and non-disabled students alike.

- **Help students recognize their own progress.** At first the progress of students with learning disorders may seem slower than the progress of their non-disabled peers--but most will learn, and learn well! Once they've found effective ways of minimizing the effects of their learning disorders, many students progress rapidly and become fine writers.

You'll notice, however, that students with learning disorders often refuse to claim credit for their own achievements. Many believe that their academic achievements are mere accidents, while their failures are the result of their true inner worthlessness. When praised or rewarded, they secretly feel like imposters. To combat "Imposter Syndrome," writers with learning disorders should keep

portfolios of their work. Looking back at their earliest efforts, they'll be reminded of how much they've learned and how far they've traveled.

Helping Students Develop A Sense of Purpose and Audience

- **Assure students that they are not writing merely to satisfy you.** Students with and without learning disorders often fail to ask themselves questions about audience and purpose. A student with a learning disorder is especially likely to assume that the instructor is his only audience, and that the sole purpose of his essay is to satisfy the instructor. Often in the past he *has not* satisfied his instructors and consequently has received poor grades; he may now assume that his sole purpose in writing is to produce acceptable prose that will earn him a passing grade.

This student's instructor must remind him that good writing involves the honest communication of the writer's own ideas, attitudes, and feelings. The writer has something to say and therefore he writes. The writer should not keep asking himself, "Will my instructor like this?"; instead he should ask, "How do I want my readers to be affected or changed by what I have written?"

- **Remind students to do some serious thinking about the question of purpose at the beginning of the writing project.** Students who take time at the very beginning of the writing project to explore some possible reasons for writing on a particular topic are less likely to wander aimlessly to and fro, hoping to stumble on "what the instructor wants."

For example, I recently interviewed a college junior named Dwayne, whose American History instructor had assigned an essay about two historians writing on the subject of the California missions. At first Dwayne was puzzled. What could the instructor possibly have in mind? One of the historians was prominent in the first decade of this century and the other historian was prominent in the 1990's; their approaches, their ideas, even their writing styles were different. How could the instructor expect him to write one paper about the two of them?

Shortly after the assignment was made, some freewriting and brainstorming helped Dwayne identify his *purpose;* he'd show that each historian was typical of the period in which he worked. This purpose gave Dwayne a direction for his thinking and research. Before Dwayne began his first draft, he used some additional freewriting to make his purpose clearer and more specific; in his essay he'd show that the work of the second historian was preferable because it was less culturally biased.

- **Encourage students to address their essays to somebody other than you.** Even more than other students, those with learning disorders insist on writing exclusively for their instructors. Sometimes they revere their instructors and sometimes they fear them, but they never forget them. Those who put their instructors on a pedestal write badly because they can't help feeling that their audience is looking down on them; could this superior being possibly be interested in what the writer has to say? Those who fear their instructors write badly

because they are overcautious; they hedge, qualify, overexplain, and compulsively over-edit in order to avoid the kind of harsh criticism they have received in the past.

Some students with learning disorders report that peer writing groups have helped them stop writing for their instructors alone. Fellow students can provide fresh, personal reactions: invaluable feedback for writers who are learning to tailor writing to a specific audience.

Other students benefit from a cognitive therapy technique; the student is trained to imagine an audience of people with whom he feels comfortable. If the student thinks of his instructor glaring threateningly at him while he is drafting, he says "Stop!" and then replaces his mental picture of the instructor with a different picture: perhaps a group of intelligent, friendly, and receptive classmates.

Making Assignments and Helping Students Meet Deadlines

- **Make writing assignments at the beginning of the term.** Everything takes longer when you have a learning disorder, so students with learning disorders should be given assignments considerably in advance of the due-dates: ideally at the beginning of the term, in the course syllabus.

- **When students begin writing projects, be sure they understand what they are supposed to do.** Students who have problems with writing may also have problems with reading or with the interpretation of oral language. Because they haven't understood the instructor's written or spoken instructions, these

students may omit key elements in a writing assignment, or may even write a good essay on the wrong topic.

When you have students with learning disorders in your writing class, you should avoid making assignments orally or having students copy assignments from a chalkboard or overhead projector. Ideally you should give each student a written copy of the assignment, and then post the assignment on your class website for reference by students who have lost your assignment-sheet. (Students with some kinds of learning disorders are very prone to losing class papers.)

After distributing a written description of an assignment, discuss it with the class. Check to be sure that students with learning disorders understand what you want them to do. Encourage students to ask questions about the assignment after class or during your office hours. Students can also use email to confirm that they have correctly interpreted the assignment and are headed in the right direction with their research.

- **Help students plan their long-term writing projects.** People with some learning disorders, especially , have a poor sense of time. It's hard for them to estimate how long each part of a writing project will take to complete. These writers need help planning the project and establishing timelines: for example, the date by which the writer will finish his research, the date by which he'll write a thesis and plan the essay's organization, and the date by which he'll finish his first draft.

With the help of instructors or learning specialists, the writer can set deadlines and mark them, in bright colors, on a large wall calendar tacked up over the writer's worksite. If the writer has nobody to help plan the project, he should calculate that every part will take him at least twice as long as he thinks it should, or twice as long as he thinks it would take a non-disabled person.

- **Keep mentioning deadlines.** Writers with may need frequent reminders that deadlines are looming: "Remember, your final drafts of the *Moby Dick* paper are due on Monday." By providing these reminders, you will not be encouraging irresponsibility; instead you will be providing something that the student lacks because of his disability: an awareness of the passing of time.

- **Give students extra time and a distraction-free environment for in-class writing assignments.** When required to write in class, students with learning disorders will often need additional time: sometimes twice the time given to non-disabled students. They may also need to write in a place where they will not be distracted by noises made by their classmates (rustling papers, shuffling feet, scratching pens) or by people outside the classroom (casual conversation from the hall or leaf-blowers outside the window). Additional time and a distraction-free location for writing will generally be requested by a specialist in the disabled students' office who has determined that the student has a disability-related need for these "academic adjustments."

- **Whenever possible permit students to select essay topics that strongly interest them.** There are several reasons why students with learning disorders may drag their feet when asked to write. One is that the writing process is slow and painful for them; another is that they frequently get low grades despite their hard work; and a third is that the topics on which they are asked to write do not engage them. Writers with are especially prone to lose concentration and focus unless the topic of an essay is strongly stimulating or personally relevant.

Encouraging Good Writing Habits

- **Require that students write often.** To dispel their phobias about writing, students with learning disorders need to write frequently, in and out of class. They can profit from daily freewriting, clustering, and journaling. The easy give-and-take of email correspondence helps some students with learning disorders get past their fear of writing. As they fire off short letters and get quick replies, they increase their awareness of how their words affect readers. (However, students with the hyperactive and impulsive variety of should be cautioned that it's easy to push the "send" button, but hard to deal with the consequences of a hot-headed email message.)

- **Suggest that students regularly work in a quiet place with materials conveniently at hand, and keep a regular writing schedule.** Students with learning disorders are often highly distractible; they need quiet places in which to work. Few can write essays in noisy coffeehouses or in the living room

while other family members are watching television. Surprisingly, some are actually able to concentrate better while listening to music, which acts as a kind of "white noise," blocking out competing sounds. Generally instrumental music works better than vocal.

Writers with learning disorders should have a settled place to work: a table, desk, or computer work-station where they do nothing but write. If they form the habit of writing in a particular place, they may begin writing when they sit down there, even if they haven't made a conscious decision to write. Ideally the worksite should have shelves for books and drawers for paper, pencils, and other supplies; when people with get up to fetch something, they often get caught up in other pastimes and forget to come back.

If at all possible, writers with learning disorders should work at the same hours each day; well-established habits effectively counter their emotional resistance to writing and their tendency to lose track of writing deadlines.

- **Tell students to write without regard to mechanics until they are ready to submit a draft.** As a result of painful school experiences, especially a tremendous over-emphasis on the importance of producing neat and error-free work, many people with learning disorders have come to regard writing as little more a classroom exercise in the mechanics of writing. Christopher Lee talks about the bad old days when she saw writing as "a bunch of spelling words that I had to reproduce in horizontal fashion. Writing was simply a horizontal spelling test" (p. 23).

Fearful that their "careless errors" will make them look stupid, writers with learning disorders constantly proofread as they write. This obsessive self-monitoring inhibits the flow of words and blights the quality of their writing. Instructors should assure students that effective communication is more important than spelling and tell them to save proofreading for last.

- **Encourage students to use computers for all stages of the writing process.** See the next chapter for specific suggestions on the many ways that computers can combat the effects of learning disorders and enhance writing skills.

Teaching Writing in a Systematic Way

- **Provide students with written step-by-step guidelines for writing processes.** When instructors lecture about writing, the learning disorders of some students may prevent their profiting from the information presented. For example, students with auditory processing deficits may misinterpret what the instructor has said; students with visual processing deficits may mis-copy material from the chalkboard; students with AD/HD may become so engrossed by details that they ignore important generalizations; and students with memory deficits may forget what they learned in lecture when they begin to draft. Students with learning disorders need *clear, explicit, step-by-step, written procedural guidelines* for all writing processes: for example, "What To Do When You First Receive a Writing Assignment," "A Guide for Doing Research," "How To Take

Notes," "How To Find a Clear, Specific Thesis for Your Essay," and "A Checklist for Essay Revision."

CHAPTER THREE:
TEACHING STUDENTS TO USE COMPUTERS FOR WRITING

In his book *Faking It: A Look Into the Mind of a Creative Learner* (1992), Christopher Lee comments, "For me spelling was like a door that kept me from learning how to write: the computer was the key that unlocked that door" (p. 28).

Knowing that their computer spellcheck programs will catch most of their mistakes, writers with learning disorders can stop worrying about misspelled words and start concentrating on what they want to say. But spellcheck is not the only advantage of the computer as a writing tool; students can use computers in many ways to counter the effects of their learning disorders.

Students with deficits in visual/motor coordination may find the handwriting process tiring or painful; for them it's easier to press down keys on a computer than to print or write cursive. Students with visual processing deficits often write more easily when they work in a *sans-serif* font and a larger type-size: for example, **Helvetica 14-point Bold.** (Before submitting their manuscripts, these students generally switch back to a more conventional font and type-size: for example, 12-point Times or Palatino.)

Students who are disorganized often do better with computers because there are fewer pieces of paper to manage. Unless they are using laptops (often

lost or stolen), the students are less likely to mislay their computers than their notecards or drafts of their essays.

In the past many student writers with learning disorders have submitted awkwardly-handwritten manuscripts full of crossed-out errors and blackened erasures. The computer makes it possible for them to take pride in the appearance of their work. Produced on the computer, the finished manuscript looks serious and professional. With their words marching crisply and cleanly across the white paper, students are more likely to think of themselves as writers and their essays as real-world communication. Moreover, seeing their words in print seems to help students stand at a healthy distance from their writing: a stance which facilitates self-assessment and the objective consideration of criticism from others.

Following are some specific suggestions for using the computer at various stages of the writing process.

Understanding the Assignment

A student can make sure that she has understood the assignment by paraphrasing it and emailing the paraphrase to her instructor. The instructor can reply by email, correcting any misunderstandings.

Planning the Writing Task

To explore the assignment before she begins working, the student can use her computer to freewrite, brainstorm, cluster, or debate with herself. These prewriting techniques, described in the following chapter, can yield valuable information: for example, the student's perception of what she's being asked to do

and why; her personal reaction to the assignment; what she already knows about the topic and what she needs to find out; how she can acquire more information; and how long the assignment may take to complete. Assisted by her instructor or learning specialist, the student can use this information to plan the writing process and set deadlines for each part.

Below is a brainstorming exercise completed by a student named Nancy after her English literature teacher assigned a 5-page paper on the topic, "The Theme of Fly-Fishing in Norman Maclean's Novel, *And A River Runs Through It*."

Preliminary Brainstorming To Prepare for the Writing of an Essay on Norman Maclean's *And A River Runs Through It*

Why'd the teacher give us this assignment? She may know some good fish restaurants, but I bet she's never been fly-fishing.

Funny choice of novel for a class with mostly women in it. Fly fishing? How do teachers pick things for us to read anyway? I'm not sure I would have picked this book.

I should watch the movie again. Will they have it at Blockbuster? Invite the other members of my writing group to see it with me?

Theme--that's something that goes all through the novel. You could tell it was important in the movie--Brad Pitt did it in slow motion. Looked beautiful. Bet it's hard though.

Rivers? I know what a river is, but what's the "it" that a river runs through?
Should I re-read the book first or see the movie? Does it matter?

Maybe go through the book and mark all the parts about fly-fishing? How long will that take? Maybe a couple of days?

Sad movie--but good sad, not miserable sad. Why wasn't it depressing? Sad when you can't help somebody you love. Wish I could help my sister--she shouldn't be with somebody who insults her the way her husband does.

Gathering and Organizing Information

The writer can use her computer to take notes instead of handwriting them on the traditional index cards. Using the computer method described below, the writer can partially organize her material as she goes; when she has finished her research she won't have to sort through a mountain of index cards in order to find a thesis and begin drafting.

To use this method, the writer sets up a series of "note-files" (Macintosh) or "note-documents" (PC) on what she thinks will be important subtopics. For example, if she is writing about the causes of the American Civil War, the writer might set up a series of note-files or note-documents on cotton-growing, slavery, abolitionists, Abraham Lincoln, and so forth. In the beginning these note-files or note-documents will be blank except for the title at the top of the screen. As the writer thinks about her topic and does research, she will drop into the appropriate note-files or note-documents any material she wants to use in her essay: her own thoughts, interesting quotations, pieces of information from books and articles. Additional note-files or note-documents can be added as needed; unnecessary ones can be deleted.

When she is ready to write her first draft, the writer can look at each note-file or note-document and ask herself, "What order should these items be in?" After giving each item an appropriate number, she can use her computer's SORT command to put the items into the correct sequence without having to retype or cut-and-paste. After completing this process for each note-file or note-document,

she can print them all out and re-read her neat and well-ordered summaries as she prepares to formulate her thesis statement and begin drafting.

Below is a portion of a note-file or note-document for Nancy's paper on "The Theme of Fly-Fishing in Norman Maclean's Novel *And A River Runs Through It.*" Items are shown in two orders: as Nancy originally wrote them, and as they appear after being computer-sorted.

Numbered but Unsorted Note-File or Note-Document on The Theme of Helping People in *And A River Runs Through It*

2 Norman wants to help his brother with his gambling problem, but he can't.

5 Norman's father says that you can't help anybody because you never really know what they want and need. (p. 66)

1 "In Maclean's novel there are many people who want to help others." Smith, p. 56.

3 In the novel a policeman says that when he wants to help people, he takes them fly fishing.

4 Norman and Paul try to help the brother of Norman's wife by taking him fly-fishing, but it's no good.

Computer-Sorted Note-File or Note-Document on The Theme of Helping People in *And A River Runs Through It*

1 "In Maclean's novel there are many people who want to help others." Smith, p. 56.

2 Norman wants to help his brother with his gambling problem, but he can't.

3 In the novel a policeman says that when he wants to help people, he takes them fly fishing.

4 Norman and Paul try to help the brother of Norman's wife by taking him fly-fishing, but it's no good.

5 Norman's father says that you can't help anybody because you never really know what they want and need. (p. 66)

Finding a Thesis

When the writer has completed her thinking and research on a subject but has not yet decided what she wants to say, she can use prewriting techniques like freewriting, brainstorming, and clustering to help her find a thesis. All of these techniques, described in detail in the next chapter, are especially effective when done on a computer. On following pages you'll find examples of clustering, using Inspiration™ software (Figure 1) and freewriting, using word-processing software (Figure 2) which Nancy did to find a thesis for her essay on *And A River Runs Through It.*

Organizing the Essay

For reasons explained in the next chapter, I don't recommend that students with learning disorders write formal outlines. They can more easily organize their essays by "chunking" material under statements that form what I call "idea lists."

After writing her thesis statement, the writer can plan its development by writing an "idea list" of important points she wants to make, then computer-sorting the points into the right sequence. She adds a number of spaces after each idea. Each section of the essay can now be written separately, with section-to-section transitions added later. The introduction and the conclusion can also be added later, after the writer has completed the body of the essay.

On a following page (Figure 3) you'll find Nancy's thesis and idea-list for her essay on "The Theme of Fly-Fishing in *And A River Runs Through It.*"

FIGURE 1: INSPIRATION™ CLUSTERING TO FIND A THESIS: "THE THEME OF FLY-FISHING IN *AND A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT*"

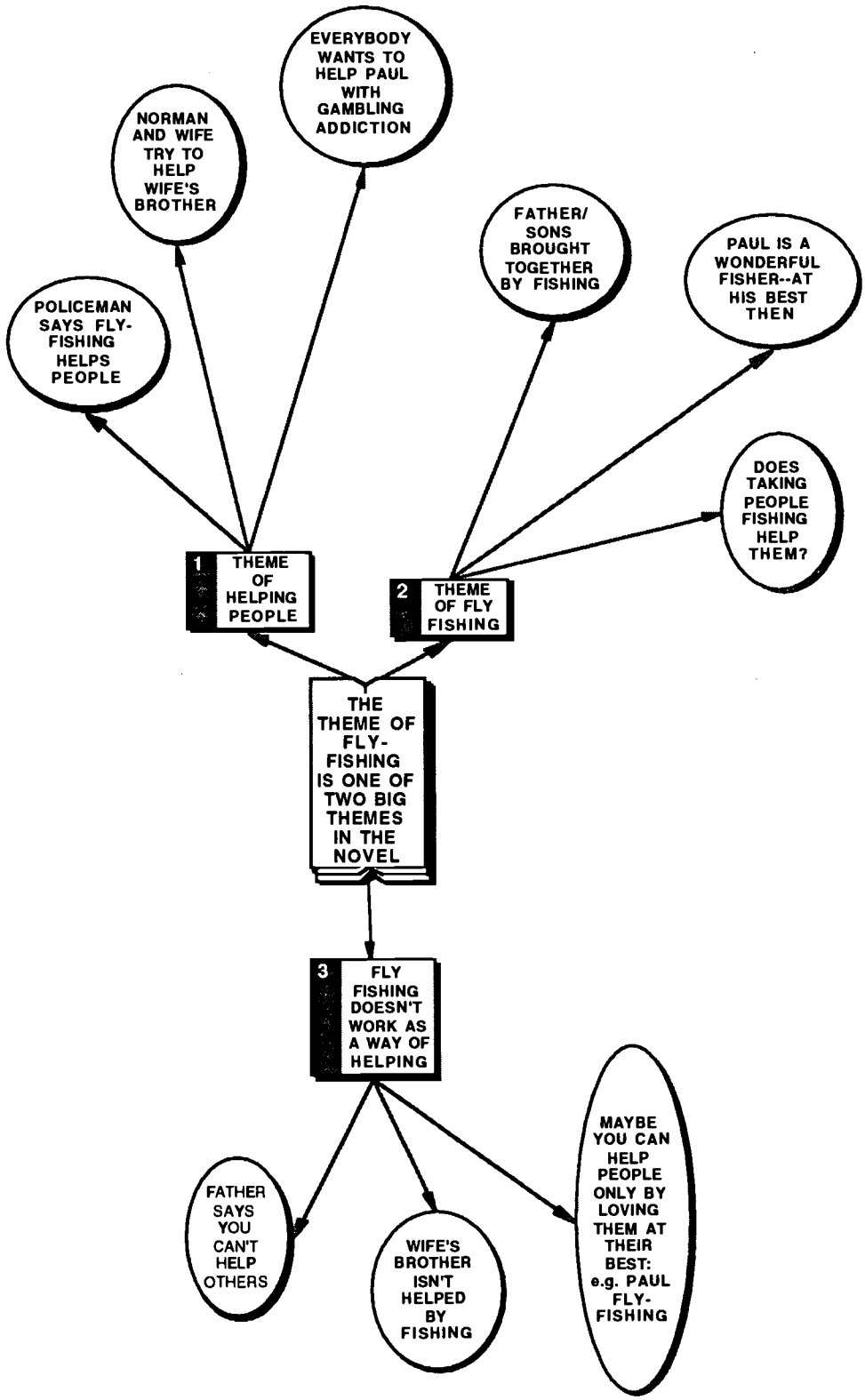

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FIGURE 2: COMPUTER FREEWRITING TO FIND A THESIS: "THE THEME OF FLY-FISHING IN *AND A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT*"

The clock is running and I am supposed to be writing so I will. I really don't know what to say. I can't think of anything, but I'm supposed to keep writing so I will and I won't stop until the timer rings. Fly fishing. That is a funny subject for me to be writing about because I have never done it or wanted to. There is no fly fishing in downtown Oakland. Ever since I saw the movie I have been sort of interested in fly fishing because it looked so great. Montana looks like a great place. I remember all those slow-motion shots of Brad Pitt fly fishing and the sparkles of water flying off his fishing rod and the sun and shade on the water. It was really beautiful. Then I read the descriptions of fly fishing in the novel. Usually I skip descriptions but I read these they were great. My mind is drifting now, funny I get to go with the drift for once. I am thinking of lunch. I wonder where I should eat. What should I eat? Fish? Actually I keep thinking of how when somebody wanted to help somebody else in the novel he took him fly fishing. The police officer told Norman that when he wanted to help somebody he took him fly fishing, and the boys took Norman's wife's cousin fly fishing only he didn't want to go. He was a bait fisherman with a big red xxxxx coffee can. There is alot about helping people in the novel, everybody tries to help everybody else, only it generally doesn't work out very well. I know from NA meetings that's just a kind of co-dependency. Paul's and Norman's father, the minister, says that you really can't help anybody because you don't know what they need or maybe they don't want you to help so you can't. Norman worries alot about helping Paul, and after Paul dies he wonders if he could have helped him and he can't ever really answer that question. When he remembers Paul he is sorry he couldn't do more for him and he feels bad about that but he feels good when he remembers Paul fishing because that's when Paul was Paul to perfection.

FIGURE 3: THESIS AND IDEA-LIST FOR ESSAY: "THE THEME OF FLY-FISHING IN *AND A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT*"

Possible introduction: Talk about my own bad experiences with trying to help people I love, especially my sister in her bad marriage.

Thesis

In Norman Maclean's novel *And A River Runs Through It,* the author says that the only real way to help people is by appreciating them when they are being themselves at their very best, like Paul when he was fly-fishing.

Idea-List

- This is fly-fishing country: everybody thinks that fly-fishing is a wonderful thing to do. The Maclean kids learn when they are very young, and always love to go fishing.

- A lot of people in the novel try to help others, and since they love fly-fishing they sometimes try to use it to help people.

- Norman and his wife try to help the wife's brother by taking him fly-fishing, but this doesn't work because the brother isn't really a fly-fisher. You can't make a fly-fisher out of a bait-fisherman.

- Norman wants to help his brother deal with his gambling addiction and get on with his life, but he can't help his brother either--but he does have a wonderful afternoon fly-fishing with his brother and his father.

- Paul when he is fly-fishing is a beautiful sight, at his very best, and Norman really appreciates him.

- You can't save anybody, but you *can* appreciate them at their very best. Norman's father knows that you can't really help anybody because you never know what they really want and need. But you can tell when they are being themselves, doing what they are meant to do in a perfect and beautiful way.

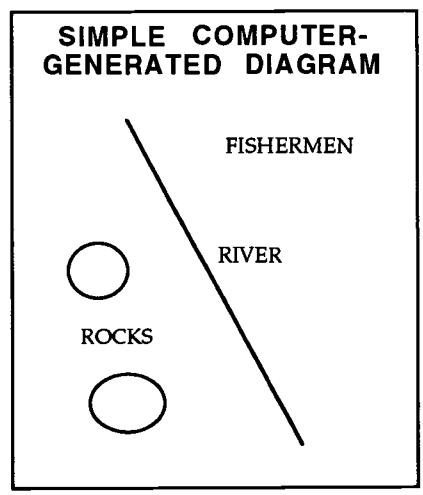
Possible conclusion; This is a sad book, but also a very wise one. We can't stop the river from flowing and changing, but when we are standing in it, we can try to be as skillful and graceful and light-hearted as Paul.

Bibliography and Notes

The writer can easily keep tabs on what she has read by entering bibliographic information into EndNote Plus™, a program that will also permit her to automatically generate a correctly-formatted bibliography. While drafting she can use the same program to automatically write accurate footnotes or endnotes in a variety of formats.

Special Effects and Proofing

Before submitting her first draft, the writer can use word-processing software to add special effects for better appearance and readability: for example, boldface subheads, bulleted and indented lists, and simple diagrams.



After using computer spellcheck, the writer should entrust her manuscript to a human proofreader. The proofreader should make corrections directly in the computer text rather than just circling errors in a printed copy of the essay, since a writer who has a learning disorder is very likely to make new errors while correcting the old ones.

Instructor/Student Conferences

I've discovered that critiquing a student's work often goes surprisingly well when the student and I are both sitting in front of a computer. The computer helps the student see the instructor as her partner-in-learning instead of

her antagonist. In his book *From Disk to Hard Copy: Teaching Writing with Computers* (1997), James Strickland reminds us that when we take a student's essay from her and mark it up, we are, in a sense, "taking possession" of the paper and then defacing it (p. 53). The situation is very different during computer conferencing, which permits the instructor to "comfortably sit side by side with the author at the computer--reading, negotiating meaning, and commenting on the text. The reader is *supporting the writer* rather than *fixing the writing;* if changes are made, the writer makes them" (Strickland, p. 54; italics the author's).

CHAPTER FOUR:
TEACHING STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISORDERS ABOUT PREWRITING, WRITING, AND REWRITING

When I ask a student about his writing process, he often tells me, "First I decide what I want to say, then I write the paper." How does he decide what he wants to say? He isn't sure--it just happens. After finishing the paper, does he go back and make changes to improve it? No, he doesn't--there's no time.

Many students with and without learning disorders seem unaware that writing ideally involves three processes: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Writers *prewrite* to answer questions like the following: "Why am I writing this?"; "Who am I writing it for?"; "What do I want to say?"; and "How can I say it effectively?" Writers *write* when they have found reasonably good answers to these questions and thus feel ready to produce a first draft. Writers *rewrite* to improve the piece, making it clearer, sharper, more effective. Rewriting includes both *editing* and *revision*. When writers are correcting errors in mechanics, diction, and sentence structure, they are editing. When writers are "reseeing, rethinking, and reshaping" the whole piece, they are revising (Lindemann, 1995, p. 29).

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Of course writers do not proceed neatly through each of these three processes in turn, beginning with prewriting, progressing to writing, and concluding with rewriting. The writer often does two things at once. Sometimes as he writes he thinks of new ideas and new ways of expressing them, so he ends up simultaneously writing and prewriting. At other times he stops in mid-draft to change a single word or recast an entire section, so he ends up simultaneously writing and rewriting.

It is essential that students with learning disorders be taught about all three writing processes: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Prewriting techniques like *freewriting, brainstorming, and clustering* can help writers counter the neuropsychological effects of learning disorders and any psychological writing blocks created by painful school experiences. A rewriting process that stresses *revision* instead of *editing* can increase the writer's sense of competence, permitting him to see himself as a skillful shaper of words.

The following *Step-by-Step Guide to Writing Expository Essays* tells students how to complete the prewriting, writing, and writing processes in a way that minimizes the effects of learning disorders.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO WRITING EXPOSITORY ESSAYS

Planning the Writing Task

- Analyze the assignment to be sure you understand what you are being asked to do. Re-write the assignment in your own words and email your re-write to the instructor, requesting approval or corrections.
- Ask yourself, "Why did the instructor make this assignment? What does the instructor hope I'll learn by doing it? What new skills or knowledges am I supposed to acquire?"
- Prewrite to explore the assignment and how you'll approach it. Again, what are you being asked to do, and why? What might be your own purpose in writing, and what audience might you address? What do you know about the topic, and what do you need to find out? How can you get additional information? How long might each part of the writing task take?
- Make a work schedule, with deadlines for each part of the writing task. Post the schedule above the desk where you work.

Gathering and Organizing Information

- Narrow your topic as much as possible. Prepare a preliminary reading list by consulting the bibliography of a first-rate, recently-published book on your topic.
- To take notes, set up a series of computer files on important subtopics. Drop in ideas, snippets of information, quotations, and other material as you come across it. Be sure to identify the origin of quotations and ideas not your own.
- Keep bibliographic information on EndNote Plus™.
- When ready to write, number the items in each computer subtopic file, then computer-sort to put the items in the right order. Print out a copy of each subtopic file.

Writing a Thesis Statement and an Idea-List

- Re-read your notes, then put them aside.
- Use one or more prewriting techniques to discover what you really want to say in your essay. Write the thesis statement.
- Define your audience. What will the members of your audience need in order to follow the development of your thesis and be convinced that it is correct?
- Keeping your audience always in mind, do more prewriting to develop an idea-list. Number the items on the list appropriately, then computer-sort to put the items into the right order.
- Cut-and-paste the idea-list into a new computer document to block out your essay, creating a series of different sections. Chunk supporting ideas and information under each section.

Drafting

- Write each section separately.
- Add clear and effective section-to-section transitions that will help your readers move easily through your essay.
- Write the introduction.
- Write the conclusion.
- Use End-Note Plus™ to automatically produce a bibliography.
- Computer spellcheck the whole document, then email it to a human proofreader or furnish it to the proofreader on a diskette. Request that the proofreader make appropriate corrections for you.
- Submit the essay.

Rewriting

- Re-read your essay and the instructor's comments.
- Put the essay away for a few days and do something else.
- Use one or several prewriting techniques to explore your topic again. Are you looking at the topic differently now? Have you changed your main idea? If so, write a new thesis statement and idea-list, then re-shape your essay.
- Again reread your essay and the instructor's comments. Has the instructor understood what you were trying to accomplish and the problems you encountered as you wrote? Has the instructor acknowledged your successes and failures, and made specific suggestions for improvement? Consider how you will use these suggestions as you revise.
- Share your essay with members of your writing group or with trusted friends. Don't ask them if your essay is good; ask them if they can tell you *at least* the main idea of your essay and your major supporting points. If they can't, you probably need a clearer and more specific thesis statement, more precise statements of your supporting ideas, and more helpful section-to-section transitions.
- To check your organization, put your thesis statement at the top of a computer screen, then add (in order) the topic sentences of all your paragraphs, or the transition sentences that begin the various sections of your essay. Show this "summary" to your writing group or to friends. Do they find your argument easy to follow? Where did they get confused?
- Consult the *Checklist for Revision*, below, for more suggestions.

PREWRITING

In his book *Writing To Learn* William Zinsser reminds us that we don't decide what we want to say and then write it down; we decide what we want to say by writing:

> Putting an idea into written words is like defrosting the windshield. The idea, so vague out there in the murk, slowly begins to gather itself into a sensible shape. Whatever we write--a memo, a letter, a note to the baby-sitter--all of us know this moment of finding out what we really want to say by trying in writing to say it. (Zinsser, 1988, p. 16)

Prewriting is a way of using writing to find out what you want to say--and some other things as well. As Erika Lindemann explains, prewriting techniques "[permit] writers to recall experiences, break through stereotyped thinking, examine relationships between ideas, assess the expectations of their audience, find an implicit order in their subject matter, and discover how they feel about the work" (Lindemann, p. 105).

Why Writers with Learning Disorders Should Prewrite

Writers with learning disorders, cautioned to "write carefully" since their earliest years, may be suspicious of prewriting techniques like brainstorming, freewriting, and clustering, which seem dangerously slipshod because they encourage playful, loose, and unstructured expression. Despite their resistance, however, writers with learning disorders should try prewriting, which benefits them in several ways.

First, most prewriting techniques permit writers with learning disorders to work fast and easily. These writers sometimes stare at their papers or computer

screens for hours without producing more than a few paragraphs. By encouraging rapid writing and an easy flow of material from the depths of the mind, prewriting helps writers forget their worries about the mechanics of writing, their linguistic blackouts, their past failures, and their fears about the future. They end up with many words on the page--a triumph in and of itself.

Second, prewriting benefits writers with learning disorders because it is usually *personal.* Scrambling to please their teachers and avoid criticism, writers with learning disorders tend to forget themselves--and self-abnegation can produce very poor prose. When writers are prewriting, they are their own audiences; writing for themselves, they have a chance to discover their own ideas and develop their own styles. (Few students freewrite or brainstorm in the artificial pseudo-literary style that some beginning writers adopt in order to impress their teachers.)

Third, prewriting is helpful as a reminder that writing can be pleasurable. The histories of some writers with learning disorders, filled with disappointment, and failure, teach them to despise their own creative abilities. Prewriting encourages the association of writing with pleasure instead of pain, progress instead of frustration. After an initial period of resistance, writers with learning disorders especially enjoy freewriting. They claim it feels good. And why wouldn't it? Even when the topic is a bore, each ten-minute freewriting is a journey into the self; the writer learns to understand himself better as he views the topic in the light of his own personality and experience. And when he freewrites, he is very likely to surprise himself by writing better than he dreamed he could.

There is gold in almost every freewriting: witty phrases, striking images, graceful sentences, arresting thoughts. Re-reading their own freewritings, people often look up and ask, "Did I really write that?"

Before he is ready to begin his first draft, a writer can use prewriting in a variety of ways:

1. ***Getting oriented to the writing task; making plans and timelines.*** Prewriting techniques are helpful for students whose learning disorders make it hard for them to understand an assignment, plan the writing task, and get started. Shortly after receiving an assignment, the writer can freewrite, brainstorm, or cluster to get information on such topics as the following: his perception of what he is being asked to do and why he is being asked to do it; his feelings about the assignment; his own purpose for writing, and the audience he wants to address; what he knows about the subject, what he doesn't know, and how he can fill gaps in his knowledge; likely directions for thought or research; what he needs to do first, second, and so forth; and even how much time he may need to complete each part of the writing process.

2. ***Finding a thesis.*** When the writer has gathered a great deal of information on his subject (by thinking about it, or by reading and taking notes), he is ready to decide what all this information adds up to. At this point prewriting techniques can help the writer decide what he wants to say about his subject. Then he can frame a clear, specific thesis statement.

3. ***Organizing the essay.*** Once the thesis statement has been written, the writer must decide how to develop it. Some writers prepare a formal outline at

this point; others informally list the main points that will support the thesis and then "chunk" material under each point (Lindemann, pp. 132-35). In either case prewriting can help the writer understand the relationships between his supporting ideas, decide in what order the ideas will be presented, and write paragraph-to-paragraph transitions that will help readers follow the progression of his thought.

Specific Prewriting Techniques

How does a writer prewrite? He can use a paper and pencil, but ideas may flow more easily if his fingers are on a computer keyboard. Freewriting, brainstorming, clustering, and debates (all described below) are four prewriting techniques that work well on the computer. Some writers use one method exclusively and others like to use a combination of methods.

1. Brainstorming

Many people are familiar with brainstorming as it is commonly done in meetings. The meeting facilitator writes a topic on the board and participants are encouraged to make comments on this topic. The facilitator uncritically records all comments, good and bad. It's important to avoid censoring.

A student writer can brainstorm on his computer by writing down a topic and then recording any and all thoughts that come to mind, skipping a space after each thought.

2. Freewriting

Freewriting is akin to what psychotherapists call "free association." These days few people undergo traditional Freudian or Jungian analysis, but almost everyone has seen cartoons in which an analyst listens intently and takes notes as his patient, lying on a couch, free associates, or talks unconstrainedly about whatever comes to mind. Freewriting offers some of the benefits of free association. During the prewriting process writers need better access to their inner selves; freewriting promotes that access. When the writer freewrites, he is in the position of the patient, letting down his guard and permitting anything at all to bubble up into awareness: snippets of thought, tag-ends of memory, associations, sense-impressions, feelings. When the writer reviews his freewriting, he becomes the analyst, observing, questioning, and reaching conclusions.

If they are to develop trust in the power of freewriting, writers with learning disorders should be introduced to it gently. Students in writing classes can be asked to freewrite twice daily, on any subject. Students can also freewrite together in class or peer writing groups. When working in private sessions, I introduce freewriting by saying, "We'll do a freewriting together. I'll sit here at the computer and be your hands. All you have to do is talk. I'll write down whatever you say."

I ask the student to select a type-face that is easy for him to read and then I write the topic of his essay in large capital letters at the top of the screen. I set a kitchen timer for ten minutes and ask the student to talk about the topic until the bell rings, saying anything and everything that comes into his mind. The only rules are that he must use sentences, not just phrases, and he must keep talking no matter what. If his mind goes blank, he can say, "My mind just went blank." If he has irrelevant thoughts, he voices them also: "I'd give anything for a Big Mac," or "I wonder why I'm always so sleepy at this hour." If he anxiously

peers at the screen, insisting that I make corrections in the text I'm typing, I turn off the brightness of my computer monitor and type "blind."

After printing out the student's freewriting, I read it aloud to him as he follows along in his own copy. Often as the student listens he has an "ah hah!" experience: a moment when all the whirling details suddenly fall into place and he knows exactly what he wants to say in his essay. If the student doesn't experience that moment of sudden clarity, I ask him to indicate the section of his freewriting that seems most alive, stimulating, or challenging. Together we do another 10-minute freewriting on the subject of that section. For most students the freewriting process eventually yields insights that permit the writing of a clear, well-focused thesis statement.

When a student has practiced freewriting with me several times, I suggest that he try it on his own. I write down the "rules" for him, stressing the importance of recording all his thoughts and censoring nothing. When he cannot think of a word, he must resist his compulsion to stop and fish for it in his memory; instead he writes "xxxxxx" or just skips a few spaces. When feeling compelled to correct his mechanical errors, he can turn down the brightness control of his monitor until it goes dark. He'll make mistakes, of course, but he won't be able to see them (Sutherland, p. 18).

There are learning disorders that prevent people from typing at a decent speed, so freewriting on the computer is cumbersome for them. These people can freewrite by hand, or they can experiment with voice-activated software, which permits a writer to talk into a microphone and have his words automatically typed by the computer. "Freetalking" is another option for non-typers. Freetalkers can set their kitchen timers or alarm watches for ten minutes and then begin talking into a portable audiotape recorder. When playing back their audiotapes, freetalkers should listen carefully to their own voices; a change in tone, pitch, or

volume of speech can signal a major shift in thinking, alerting the freetalker to an idea which will serve as the basis for a good thesis statement

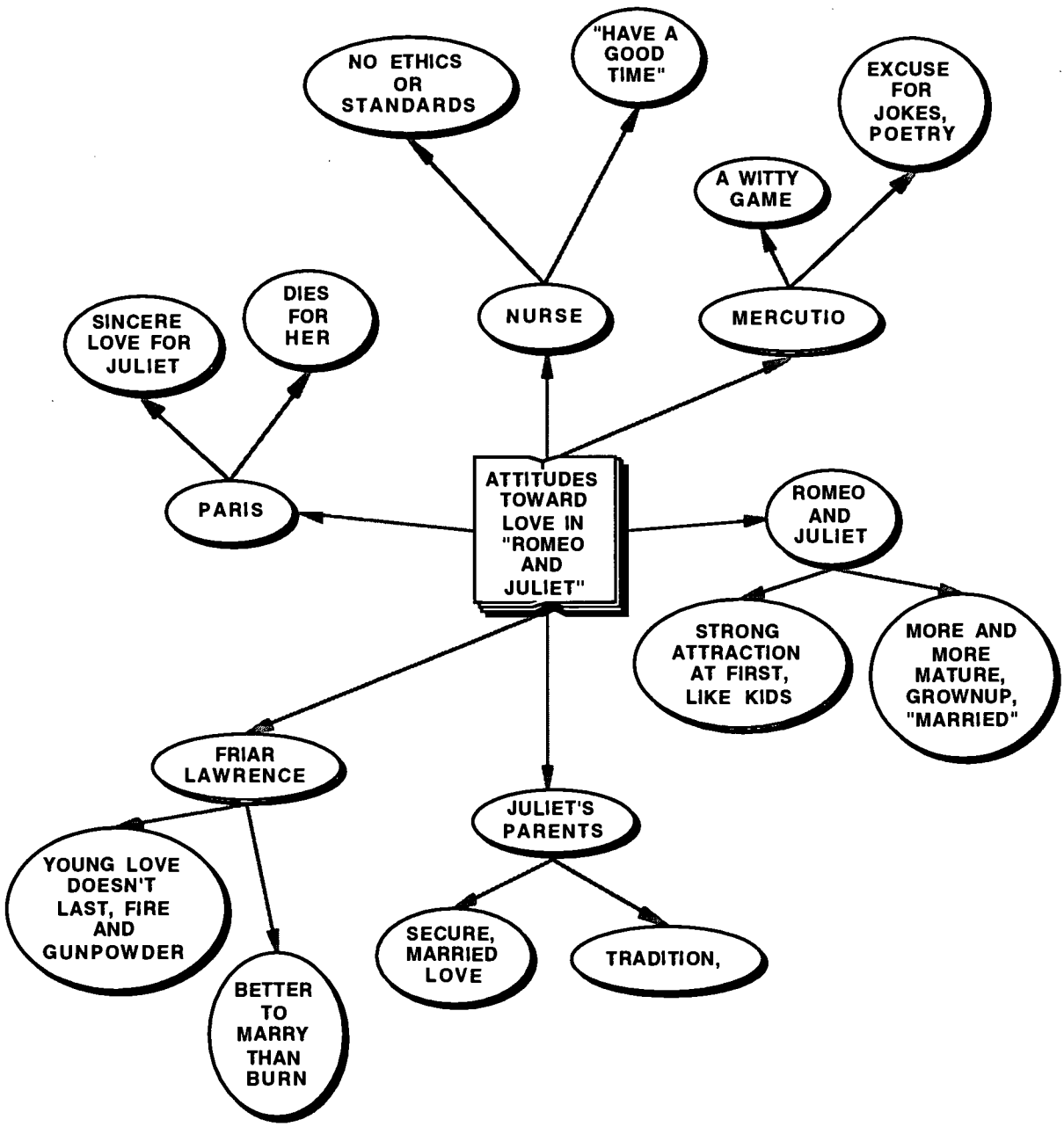
3. Clustering

In her book *Writing the Natural Way* (1983), Gabriele Lusser Rico describes a technique which she calls "clustering." Rico points out that "just as many natural forms come in clusters--grapes, lilacs, spider eggs, cherries--so thoughts and images, when given free rein, seem to come in clusters of associations" (p. 29). The writer who wants to "cluster" begins with a specific word or phrase and radiates out from this "nucleus," exploring all the associations that come to mind.

Some writers like to cluster by taping huge sheets of paper to their walls, writing their subject in the center and using it as a springboard to various new thought-clusters. Inspiration™ is a computer program which lets writers cluster on the computer. Starting with a "main idea" in the middle of the screen, the writer draws arrows ("links") to connecting ideas. If the writer arrives at a different understanding of how his ideas relate to one another, he can change the position of the ideas or the arrows.

When a writer decides that he'd like to see his ideas in the form of a traditional outline instead of a diagram, the program will automatically make the change for him. The automatic outlining feature of Inspiration™ is enthusiastically welcomed by many students with learning disorders whose teachers demand that they produce traditional outlines, something they cannot easily do.

DIAGRAM VERSION OF INSPIRATION™ CLUSTERING ON SHAKESPEARE'S *ROMEO AND JULIET*



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4. Debating

All of us debate with ourselves on different occasions. Should we go to a community college or a four-year school? Stay in a relationship or say goodbye? Take that new job or stay put? As a prewriting technique, debates permit writers to clarify their ideas and refine their thinking by arguing with themselves.

Writers can use their computers to debate with themselves by writing the topic, then using the INSERT TABLE command to add a table with two columns and as many rows as the writer thinks might be necessary. (I usually choose 30 or 40 rows, just to be sure I have enough.) Hitting the TAB key moves me rapidly from one side of the table to the other without disrupting my thought. In the following example, I've added lines to my table in order to make it more readable, but lines aren't absolutely necessary.

AN EXAMPLE OF DEBATING

"Fate *versus* individual responsibility in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*"

Romeo and Juliet are bring about their own destruction.	No they don't. They are star-crossed lovers.
Romeo decided to court Juliet, though his parents and hers were enemies. What did he expect?	It all would have worked out okay if the lovers hadn't had such bad luck: Romeo's killing Juliet's kinsman, and so forth.
Talking about that killing: if Romeo hadn't got carried away during a street brawl, he wouldn't have been exiled.	Did Romeo create the feud that resulted in the street brawl? Hardly. He was born into the feud. Bad luck again!
Juliet made the choice to pretend to be dead; that was her decision. That was risky. Nobody forced her.	Everything would have worked out ok if the messenger to Romeo hadn't gotten shut up in a plague house. Bad luck again!

5. Outlines and Idea-Lists

Almost all student writers are familiar with one prewriting technique: the formal outline. From high school onward, they've been taught, "You must always outline before you write!" and they hold this truth to be self-evident. I notice, however, that few students actually *write* outlines; they just *say* they do.

Instructors have the best of motives when they insist that students write outlines; they want to prevent students from producing unreadable essays that are nothing more than laundry lists of miscellaneous details. When a student writes, they want him to write with purpose and intention, producing an organized essay with one main idea (the thesis) to which everything in the essay contributes, instead of a chaotic essay that rambles on and on, heading nowhere in particular.

Unfortunately many student writers appear to have misunderstood their instructors. These writers believe, or say they believe, that writing an outline must come before everything else, even the writing of the thesis statement. But how *can* the outline come first? An outline is a plan for the orderly step-by-step development of a writer's thesis. A writer cannot plan the development of his thesis until he has written one, anymore than he can cut up an apple pie and distribute its pieces before he has baked the pie. I generally advise students to use prewriting techniques like freewriting and clustering to get clear about what they want to say in their essays; then they can frame thesis statements, and after that they can write outlines if they want to and can remember how.

Some writers with learning disorders *cannot* write outlines no matter how hard they try; they get confused when they try to remember those sequences of numbers and letters (I, II, A, B, 1, 2) not to speak of getting each line properly indented and maintaining sentence parallelism. I generally advise these writers

to avoid formal outlines and write "idea-lists" instead. Idea-lists simply record, in the proper order, all the points that the writer wishes to make as he develops his thesis, with each point stated in a way that makes clear its logical relationship to the thesis and to the preceding point.

To prepare an idea-list, the writer reviews his thesis statement and his prewriting exercises, then makes a list of all the points he'll have to cover to support his thesis. He then puts the points into the right order. To find the right order, he may arrange and re-arrange the points on his computer (numbering appropriately, then using his computer's SORT command), or he may write each point on an separate index card and then lay the cards out on the floor in different configurations until he finds the best one.

To make sure the points follow one another logically, the writer can practice orally explaining his thesis and supporting points to another person or to an audiotape recorder. Oral presentations sharpen the writer's understanding of how one point is logically related to another, permitting him to write paragraph-to-paragraph (or section-to-section) transitions that move readers smoothly through his essay.

WRITING

When a beginning writer drafts, he generally faces problems in three areas: getting started, keeping going, and staying focused. If the student has a learning disorder, the causes of his problems may be unusually complex. Like his non-disabled peers, the writer with a learning disorder may have received poor or insufficient instruction in the past. He may also be suffering from the effects of his

disability *per se* or from a psychological writing block caused by painful experiences with writing during his elementary or high school years.

In order to help a student with a learning disorder, we must disentangle the various causes of his writing problems. We need general information about the student's disability, the writing instruction that the student has received in the past, and the student's current writing practices. When he drafts, what does he do first, second, and third? Who does he imagine will read his essay? When, where, and how does he write? What helps him write easily, what slows him down, what brings him to a screeching halt?

Getting Started

"I don't know where to begin." When a student says he doesn't know where to begin, he may mean, "I really don't know what I want to say." He can solve this problem by using prewriting techniques to find a thesis and write an idea-list. Sometimes "I don't know what to say" is better translated as, "This whole writing project seems overwhelming to me!" Composing his essay may seem less threatening to the student if he approaches it one section at a time. If the student is working on a computer, the idea-list he developed after freewriting, brainstorming, or clustering can be cut-and-pasted into a new document to form the bones of his essay. He'll put flesh onto the bones by writing a series of paragraphs under each idea. Completing one section before moving on to the next, the writer feels that he is progressing by small, sure steps instead of leaping into the abyss.

"I always wait to begin the essay till the night before it's due." As I explained earlier, many students with learning disorders have difficulty with time-management. Instructors can help by establishing specific deadlines for prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Each student can be required to submit freewriting exercises, a sound thesis statement, and an organizational plan of some kind before beginning his first draft.

"I never get around to working on my essay." It's important to understand *why* the student never sits down to work on his essay. Students with some learning disorders (especially) have a way of forgetting things they are supposed to do; they're not "resisting," they've really forgotten. These students need to form the habit of writing every day: at the same time and in the same place. If they have and take psychostimulant medication (for example, Ritalin, Dexedrine, or Adderol) to improve their concentration, students should write in the morning or the afternoon; most people can't take psychostimulants in the evening because they interfere with sleep--and without medication they may drift from activity to activity, never getting around to writing. Students with learning disorders of all kinds should work in a quiet, well-lit, distraction-free environment. Such environments are hard to find on most college campuses, where even libraries may buzz with loud conversation. Occasionally a college student is lucky enough to arrange writing time at a friend's off-campus apartment.

Some students remember the writing task but are reluctant to begin. These students should be taught ways of seducing themselves into writing. Like my clients, I sometimes don't want to write but have to meet a deadline. On such oc-

casions I tell myself, "You don't have to write anything today if you don't want to. You're just going to sit down and play with the material. Wouldn't you enjoy doing a short freewriting on this interesting topic? How about some clustering? Why not throw a few sentences under each of the ideas on your idea-list?" By offering myself tasks that seem relatively short and pleasant, I can sometimes conn myself into writing when I would prefer not to.

Frequently I encounter a student who cannot even begin writing because he always imagines his work being read by a harsh critic: perhaps a demanding parent or a teacher who humiliated him when he was younger. This student may write more easily if he imagines a friendlier audience: a group of supportive friends or classmates. If he regularly works with other students in a peer writing group, he may form the habit of addressing group members instead of terrifying ghosts from his past.

A student who is extremely anxious about writing may require referral to a psychologist who specializes in treating panic disorders and phobias. In some cases medication is needed, but many patients do well with cognitive therapy alone. Cognitive therapists are generally good teachers of anxiety-management skills (Beck, p. 186), which include relaxation exercises and sending oneself positive messages ("This happens sometimes; you can handle it") instead of pronouncements of doom ("Now you'll *never* finish your essay!).

Keeping Going

Some students sit down to write and proceed at a good pace for awhile--but then slow down or stop. Again, it's important to understand why.

Some students with learning disorders relentlessly edit their work while they are drafting. When he finds himself obsessively worrying about mechanics and compulsively fine-tuning his sentences, the writer who uses a computer can skip a few lines and loosen up with some freewriting or brainstorming, perhaps switching to italics or all-caps to distinguish this prewriting material from the regular text of the essay. When he cannot think of a word he wants to use, the writer shouldn't stop dead and try to retrieve the word from memory-storage; instead he should type "xxxxxxx," skip a space, or "talk around" the missing word. (For example, he can replace the missing word "syllabus" with "that list of things that profs give you on the first day of the class."

Occasionally a writer with a learning disorder "freezes": goes completely blank, so he cannot write a word. Freezes are terrifying, but writers can learn to cope with them. It's essential to avoid "catastrophizing." The writer should not tell himself, "This always happens! Now you'll never finish the paper! You're doomed!"; instead he should tell herself, "This happens sometimes because of your . Remember, it's a temporary condition. Take a break and do some relaxation exercises, then come back. You'll be okay!" Till the writer learns to say these reassuring words to himself, he'll need to hear them from his instructor, tutor, or learning specialist.

"Freezes" happen less often when writers with learning disorders are careful to get enough rest, eat and drink sensibly, and take frequent breaks. It's especially important for people with learning disorders to take good care of themselves, because having any kind of learning disorder is tiring and stressful. A task that a non-disabled writer can perform with effortless ease (for example, holding a short sentence in working memory while modifying its structure) can be hard work for a writer with a learning disorder; and every part of the composing process takes longer.

No writer, with or without a learning disorder, should sit at his writing desk or computer work-station for longer than a half-hour without giving himself a break. The writer may want to set a kitchen timer or wristwatch alarm at the beginning of each break; the ring or chime will remind him that the break is over.

Staying Focused

Students with learning disorders are more likely to stay focused if they begin the drafting process by writing the body instead of the introduction. Too often a writer with organizational problems is distracted by an accidental turn-of-phrase in his introduction and--forgetting his thesis--goes off on a tangent. It's best for the student to write his thesis statement at the top of his first page, insert a copy of his idea-list (with spaces between the ideas), and proceed to develop each idea in turn. Working on one discrete section at a time makes it easier for him to resist "drifting."

If he is working with a peer writing group, the student can ask the other members of the group to read his manuscript and put a check in the margin whenever they think he has veered away from his thesis. If he is working alone and his essay is relatively short, the student can check its coherence by marking the topic sentence of each paragraph. If he is using a computer, the writer can then cut-and-paste the topic sentences into another document with his thesis statement written at the top. When the sentences stand alone instead of being imbedded in text, the writer can more easily see which develop his thesis and which are digressions.

REWRITING

The problem that students with learning disorders have with rewriting is the same one they have with prewriting; they don't do it. For a number of reasons, students with learning disorders strenuously resist rewriting.

• ***The writer may think that he has failed again when he is asked to rewrite.*** The writer with a learning disorder hates to even *think* about rewriting because he equates rewriting with failure; when the instructor requests a rewrite, he is sure that he is being punished for not having "done it right" the first time.

To counter the misconception that rewriting is punishment, the instructor should frequently stress the importance of rewriting *for all writers*. He should teach rewriting techniques and give all students time to rewrite. To underscore the importance of rewriting, the instructor may want to consider assigning letter grades only to rewritten final drafts.

• *The writer may fear that he won't have time to rewrite.* Most students with learning disorders are "time-poor." For them every writing assignment takes twice as long as it should, and they tremble when they think of all the work they'll have to complete before the end of the term.

Writers with learning disorders cannot be expected to rewrite in their spare time; they don't have any. In planning his writing course, the instructor should allow ample time for prewriting, writing, and rewriting; all students should be given time to rewrite before moving on to the next assignment.

• *The writer may be discouraged by his grade on the first draft.* Students with learning disorders are unusually grade-sensitive. A low grade on a first draft crushes them, and even a high grade isn't adequate recompense for their countless hours of hard labor. Students with learning disorders feel frustrated and angry when they notice that their grades are no higher than the grades of students who worked half as long.

A student with a learning disorder is generally more willing to rewrite when his instructor has responded to his first draft without assigning a letter or number grade. If the instructor knows that the student has spent many hours on that draft, he can acknowledge the student's extra effort in his written response.

• *The writer may think that "rewriting" means "editing."* The writer's resistance to the task of rewriting may be stiffened by his misunderstanding of the word "rewrite." He thinks that "rewrite" means "correct," and he feels helpless to correct his many mechanical errors.

An instructor's written response to a student's first draft should emphasize the importance of *revision* and de-emphasize *editing*. Unless he wants to increase the writer's guilt about "careless errors" and decrease the writer's trust in him, the instructor should refrain from circling or underlining every misspelling, every sentence with a missing word, every grammatical error, every illegible phrase, every smudged erasure.

• ***The writer may not understand what "revision" means.*** Beginning writers need to be reminded that they already know how to revise; they do it all the time. Revision is not the last stage of composing but instead happens anytime and every time a writer alters his material to make it better accomplish his purpose. Nancy Sommers asks, "Instead of thinking of revision as an activity at the end of the process, what if we thought of revision as a process of making a work congruent with what a writer intends--a process that occurs throughout the writing of a work?" (p. 48).

A writer with a learning disorder may not have much faith in his own ability to revise his work. His faith may be strengthened if he is encouraged to think about revision even before submitting his first draft. He can accompany his draft with a written statement about his purpose and his success in achieving it. What problems did he encounter as he wrote? How well did he solve these problems? Which parts of the essay does he especially like and which parts don't he like? If he had more time, how might he change the essay? What kind of advice would he like from the instructor?

Of course the instructor's suggestions about revision will be informed by his understanding of what the writer is trying to do. In his essay, "Sympathy for the Devil: Editing Alternate Style," Michael Spooner stresses the importance of "[imagining] the text as the author sees it":

> The editor's function is to make a repertoire of knowledge available to the author--knowledge of language, of audience, of voice, and of style. When advising an author on editorial matters, the editor should encourage choices that are consistent with the author's voice and vision for the text, not simply enforce traditional rules. (Spooner, pp. 158-59)

Students with and without learning disorders often take to revision more easily when they have a chance to work with others in a peer writing group. There they learn about revision by helping others revise, while getting feedback that they can use in reworking their own early drafts. Working alone or in a peer writing group, students can profit from the use of a "Checklist for Revision" like the one on the following pages.

CHECKLIST FOR REVISION

Adapted from Erika Lindemann's *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers, p. 203*

Subject, Audience, Purpose

- What is the subject of my essay? What is the most important thing I say about the subject?
- Who am I writing this essay for? Who are my readers?
- Will my readers be interested in what I say about my subject? Why or why not?
- What do the readers already know about my subject, and what do they need to have me tell them?
- How do I want my readers to be affected or changed by what I have written?
- What tone of voice do I use in talking to my readers?
- At the beginning of my essay, do I tell readers what to expect? Is there a specific thesis statement? Do I explain how I will develop my thesis?
- At the end of the essay, do I convince readers that what I have said is important? In what way is it important?

Organization

- How many specific points do I make as I develop my thesis?
- Are some of the points repeated? Did I leave out some points I should have made?
- Are the points in the right order?
- Did I include some points that have nothing to do with the thesis?
- How do I help the reader get from one point to the next?

Paragraphing (Ask these questions of every paragraph)

- What is the main idea of this paragraph? Will readers know what the main idea is?
- Will readers be able to tell how this paragraph relates to the paragraphs before and after?
- Did I develop the main idea of this paragraph fully enough? Are there examples, illustrations, details?
- Do the sentences in this paragraph "hang together" and follow each other in the right order? Are there sentence-to-sentence transitions that help the reader go through the paragraph? Does the paragraph flow smoothly?

Sentences (Ask these questions of every sentence.)

- Which sentences do I like best? Which do I like least? Why?
- Do I use sentences of different lengths and types, with different rhythms?
- Do I use specific words and avoid general ones (like "things," "people," and "this/that").
- Can I make my sentences more specific and vivid by adding adjectives and adverbs, or more lively verbs?

In General

- Did I computer spellcheck this paper and use a human proofreader?
- What do I like best about this paper? What do I like least?
- What do I want to work on in the future?

CONCLUSION:
THE STUDENTS IN THE BACK ROWS

Writing this book took me back to the days when I taught college English. I was a good teacher in some ways but not in others. Too often I taught to the students I thought were the "brightest": the ones who sat in the front rows, hung upon my every word, learned fast, wrote easily and well. I didn't pay enough attention to the students in the back rows: those who were silent in class, stared out the windows, wrote disappointing essays, and submitted work late.

What accounted for the poor performance of the students in the back rows? Some had never been taught to write and were poorly prepared for college. Others didn't want to learn; they couldn't believe they'd ever need writing skills. Still others probably had learning disorders.

In those days I'd never heard of learning disabilities or Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder and had no idea how drastically these conditions can complicate the writing process. Students with learning disorders are often intelligent and hard-working. They have interesting ideas, but writing can be hard for them because of their learning disorders *per se* and also because of psychological writing blocks induced by painful writing experiences in elementary and high school.

Writing instructors who want to assist students with learning disorders need not return to school for degrees in special education. This book will provide some general information about learning disorders as they affect writing.

After acquiring specific information by talking with their students about their learning disorders, writing histories, and current writing practices, instructors will be ready to guide the students through prewriting, writing, and rewriting in a genuinely helpful way.

Beginning writers with learning disorders need understanding and encouragement even more than they need good pedagogy. Learning disorders can be tiring and disheartening; these students need our support in order to keep writing. They have important things to say, and our society needs to hear them. They can tell us about schools that hurt instead of help, and they can describe how children feel when they are accused of being stupid, lazy, or irresponsible. They can remind us that all students want to learn and *can* learn, though some learn differently. Above all, they can teach us to celebrate difference instead of condemning it.

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